

August 27, 2023 Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Proper 16

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Psalm 138; Romans 12:1-8

“Grace Happens”

Anne Peacock

Let us pray with a blessing by Jan Richardson:

Gracious God, May your words lay themselves like a blessing upon our heads, our shoulders, as if, like hands, they could pass on to us what we most need for this day, as if they could anoint us not merely for the path ahead but for this ordinary moment that opens itself to us. Amen.

As I read today’s scripture and prayed about this message, the word “grace” spoke to me from Paul’s letter to the Romans. I suppose you could say that I “happened upon grace.” The more I sat with the word “grace,” the harder it was for me to define until I remembered stories of God’s grace in my life. I think of grace as hearing, tasting, feeling, and seeing God; whenever I notice his presence. Grace is everywhere and is always with us – we just aren’t always awake to its whispers.

When I was introduced to contemplative prayer, I was astounded at how God spoke to me in a way I had never experienced before. This was a huge turning point in my spiritual journey. Afterwards, I felt fractured and vulnerable and, through my despair, realized I had lost touch of who God created me to be. God was there all along, but I didn’t know to ask for help, and I didn’t think I needed help. Yet my experiences and conversations with God in the secret corners of my heart were real. This was the beginning of my deep conviction in God’s amazing grace.

The apostle Paul said, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.” Our response to God’s grace is to shape our whole lives (body, mind, and spirit) by his will. Contemplative prayer invites this transformation so that our whole life becomes a living prayer: the shape of grace.

God chose Saul to be an instrument proclaiming Christ as Savior of the world. Saul's conversion from a man who persecuted many Christians to St. Paul, one of the greatest religious leaders of all time, is truly a story of amazing grace. Despite his past, God had faith in Saul to be a future apostle, and God has faith in us. Reflecting on Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul Achtemeier states, "God's grace finds expression in the various ways Christians are moved by grace to enact their faith, ...Every Christian has been given a spiritual gift, and part of one's Christian responsibility is to discover what gift one has and then use it for the glory of God."

God's grace is not just for a select few – it is a gift freely given to us all, but it is up to us to open and receive this gift. I will always remember how desperately my brother searched for God. One day when Tommy seemed open to deeper discussion, I took a risk and shared this story with him: While on a week-long youth trip, every day I saw butterflies – etched in glass, worn on clothing or the glasses of people I met, in a song at a restaurant, and in a church hall, butterflies were even emerging from cocoons. After hearing this, all he said was, "That's like when you buy a new car and then you see the same kind of car everywhere." His rational way of thinking wanted clear answers and kept him from seeing. I was blind to God's grace for many years. Unlike Saul's experience of conversion, God communicated to me with a subtle whisper or a playful game of hide and seek; always in a mysterious way.

One day I found God in the asphalt! I was taking a walk on a bright sunny day. My eyes were drawn to the road covered with sparkling objects like thousands of glistening stars. Later, at a sad time in my life, I was eager to feel the presence of God again and went for a walk along the same path. It was another sunny day, but I didn't see the "stars". I kept looking along the road ahead, beside and behind me. No stars. As I rounded the corner to return home, I noticed a greeting card, a bit dirty, on the road next to a trash can. It caught my eye because butterflies were pictured on the front of the card. I opened it. No one had written in it, but its message said, "Thinking of you and wishing you happiness this day and always." I felt as if these words were meant for me from someone I loved very dearly. Grace touched me as my eyes were again drawn to the road. There they were; millions of stars! God had reappeared! He is never found in the same place, but if we seek God

with our whole heart we will find him. It's important to hold onto these moments of grace for times of darkness when memories of God's love may sustain you.

Programs weaving scripture, art and music, were born through ruminating on the words God spoke to me while walking a labyrinth: "Find your voice," and later I heard, "Go back to your music." I wondered, did I really hear that? I responded, "That would be nice, but I'm fine." God patiently tried different angles until I awoke enough to realize I had to change and save my crumbling soul. I first had to rediscover gifts that had remained hidden for many years. Allowing myself to open to God's grace and through practicing a regular discipline of contemplative prayer, I began to notice and experience wonder and awe. Music and faith became interwoven, and practicing the piano became prayer. An inner excitement grew that I hadn't experienced before. God was pulling me out of the mire, and I was beginning to transform from my false self toward who I felt God created me to be. But this change did not happen overnight. Although the in-between times of silence can be dark and uncomfortable, they are necessary for transformation. These times are also full of grace where we may experience deep growth that never happens otherwise. Like the life cycle of a butterfly, we emerge from this silence into something new.

Thomas Keating said, "Silence is God's first language. Everything else is a poor translation." (I think music is a close second!) Paul's letter to the Hebrews begins, "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets and by a Son...therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it." The Word of God was spoken before it was written. In written form, including emails and texts, we cannot hear the inflections of the one who speaks. We do not hear the sounds in the background, the smells and sights that bring dimension to the words. How then might scripture come alive for us today? We must infuse the words within our being – read, listen, hear, chew on the words, ruminate, reflect, and pray, until the words come to life within us and we hear God's voice for us in this moment.

Eugene Peterson said, "The primary organ for receiving God's revelation is not the eye that sees but the ear that hears – which means that all of our reading of

Scripture must develop into a hearing of the word of God.” This way of reading, if practiced over time, becomes a way of living...living the Word of God.

When I first practiced a contemplative prayer discipline, I wondered if anything was even happening. I had my own expectations of God. It’s important to leave our expectations behind and simply offer to God the gift of our listening ears.

I invite you now to pray together with Psalm 138, which Bill read earlier. First, listen to the living Word of God with full attention. Lucy and Claire will explain...

Child: You always repeat things three times.

Elder: Just the important things.

Child: Why? I hear you the first time.

Elder: No. You listen the first time. You hear the second time. And you feel the third time.

Child: I don’t get it.

Elder: When you listen, you become aware. That’s for your head. When you hear, you awaken. That’s for your heart. When you feel, it becomes a part of you. That’s for your spirit. Three times. It’s so you learn to listen with your whole being. That’s how you learn.

I will read the Psalm three times with silence between the readings. As the Psalm is read, grace may reveal a word or phrase that speaks to you of God’s presence in this moment. Listen and hear the spoken word. There will be sounds that distract – that is part of life and an opportunity to practice turning toward God. After the reading, we will enter into a time of silent prayer. The hymn tune will call us back...

Anne: Read Psalm, chime singing bowl entering into 45 seconds of silence

Anne: Chime singing bowl – bringing us out of silence

Calista: Hum hymn tune # 467 (once)

Now we move into meditation, reflecting on the word and asking, “What is God saying to me?” What does God want to reveal to me? “Gracious God, Teach us how to open our mind and heart to hear and understand what you are saying to us in this moment.” Meditate on the word as I read the Psalm a second time...

Anne: Read Psalm, chime singing bowl entering into 45 seconds of silence

Anne: Chime singing bowl – bringing us out of silence

Calista: Sing verse one of hymn 467 “Give Us Light”

Thomas Merton said, “Unless the waters of the spring are living and flow outward, the spring becomes only a stagnant pool. And if the stream loses contact with the spring which is its source, it dries up.” Thelma Hall shares, “In this image of Merton’s, contemplation is the spring of living water, and action is the stream that flows out from it to others; it is the same water.” As scripture says, “From his heart shall flow streams of living water.” We as Christians are called to flow out into the world sharing our gifts. This is the gift of the Holy Spirit; the flow of God’s love and grace.

How does Christ invite you to respond to the Word? As I read a third time, allow your deepest self to be transformed by God’s word...

Anne: Read Psalm, chime singing bowl entering into 45 seconds of silence

Anne: Chime singing bowl – bringing us out of silence

Calista: Sing second verse of hymn 467 “Give Us Life”

One summer my husband and I strolled into the bay, immersed in the waters of Cape Cod. The water at low tide was waist-deep, so we could walk out quite far as the waters peacefully lapped around us. Suddenly the swishing of the waves stopped and there was nothing but silence. We looked at each other, speechless, and listened. Eventually we heard a whispering in the distance, then a murmuring crescendo. Shallow ripples approached, gently surrounding us. We had just seen, heard, and felt the turning of the tide, and knew we had experienced a sacred moment.

The final movement of this prayer is contemplation. It is living the scripture, and like being immersed in the gentle waters of God’s love; too deep for words. Here we enter the unknown mystery as we let go of our own words and simply rest in God...

Anne: Chime singing bowl entering into 45 seconds of silence

Anne: Chime singing bowl – bringing us out of silence

Calista: Sing final verse of hymn 467 "Give Us Grace"

We have just shared in a contemplative practice called "sacred reading," which came to be known over the years by its Latin phrase, *lectio divina*. It flows between reading sacred text, meditation, prayer, and contemplation, like a relationship, and then our love flows out as we express our gifts in the world. Kathleen Norris said, "Maybe one reason we worship is to respond to grace. We praise God not to celebrate our own faith but to give thanks for the faith God has in us." How might we come to know God's will for us? Listen and notice whispers of grace, sit with these gifts from God, ponder them in your heart, and pray "What is mine to do?" Then act from a source deep within.

Grace happens. Are you awake?

And now a prayer by Martin Israel:

Let the healing grace of your love, O Lord, so transform me that I may play my part in the transfiguration of the world from a place of suffering, death and corruption to a realm of infinite light, joy and love. Make me so obedient to your Spirit that my life may become a living prayer, and a witness to your unfailing presence. Amen.