

How Do We Embody Grace?

Let's begin this time of reflection with prayer. God of expansive, spacious love – that which we know as grace, be with us this morning as we invite ourselves into deeper reflection on how we embody your grace. We ask your Holy Spirit's presence and guidance. Amen.

Beloved friends, how do we embody grace? Grace is the gift of God's expansive, spacious love. And that gracious love provides the foundation for our Christian faith. I am eager to share with you insights into grace as articulated through each of our three scripture readings for today. I hope they will touch your spirit as they have touched mine. May our ancestors in faith inspire us to embody grace, sharing it with others as freely as we receive it from God.

Let's begin in the desert wilderness with the people of Israel, moving between a time of enslavement and a time of anticipated freedom and prosperity. While many of us cannot relate to their particular conditions, we can deeply relate with their emotional and spiritual experiences along the way. We heard:

*“The Israelites traveled from Mount Hor along the road to the Sea of Reeds **in order to avoid** Edom. But the people **grew impatient along the way**, and they addressed their concerns to God and Moses: ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? We have no bread! We have no water! And we are disgusted with this terrible food!’”*

The people had chosen a path that allowed them to avoid passing through a particular community. **I wonder, have you ever created more work for yourself in an effort to avoid a challenging interaction?**

Already on edge in their avoidance, the people grew impatient with each surfacing annoyance until they exploded in reactivity, blaming their leader Moses and even God for their miserable state.

The way our ancestors told their story, they imagined God punishing them with the appearance of venomous snakes. A recurring spiritual question in our shared human existence is this: why do bad things happen? Why is there suffering? Often we jump right from the uncomfortable question of why to a simpler question: who or what makes bad things happen? I would argue that this question might be just as mysterious. Across human history, we have naturally leaned toward assigning power to God according to whatever concept of God we hold to be true. We heard:

*“Then God sent venomous snakes among the people. They fatally bit many of the people. So the people came to Moses and said, ‘**We sinned when we spoke against God and against you. Intercede for us, and ask that God remove the snakes from us.**’”*

I wonder if you have ever lived among snakes. I have. I lived in Texas for four years and I jogged through fields through which I had not business jogging. Snakes are very scary and they cannot be controlled by us. A clear threat caught their full attention. The thread of poisonous snakes was one outside their control. And they figured they were sent by God. It caught their enough that they finally awoke and recognized and claimed their own behavior. We heard:

*“So Moses prayed for the people. And God said to Moses, ‘**Make a snake and put it on the end of a pole. Anyone who is bitten and looks at it will live.**’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole.*

Then whenever the people were bitten by a snake, they looked at the bronze snake and lived.” What a mystery! The bronze snake served as a focal point – a reminder of their need for support (also from somewhere outside their own full control). This was the power of a pause in their movements.

How do we embody grace? One important way that the people of Israel have shown us that we can share in the work of grace is by recognizing and claiming our own problematic behaviors and opening ourselves to support that might come from behind our own control. This is grace.

Let’s shift to our reading from the letter to Ephesians, most likely written by a follower of the Apostle Paul in his name. We heard, *“You were **dead** because of your sins and offenses...”*

I shared earlier with our young people an illustration of our efforts to stay on a path like a curb along a roadside – to stay on the path of love and kindness. Sometimes we slip off. We err and... THUNK – dead weight. We move away from the path of love at times, so we know that feeling of deadness. We went on to hear:

*“But God, **rich in mercy and loving us so much**, brought us to life in Christ, even when we were dead in our sins... And it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith—and even that is not of yourselves, but **the gift of God**... God raised us up and, **in union with Christ Jesus**, gave us a place in the heavenly realm, to **display in the ages to come** how immense are the resources of God’s grace and kindness in Christ Jesus... We are **God’s work of art**, created in Christ Jesus **to do the good things God created us to do from the beginning.**”*

How, according to this letter to the Ephesians, might we embody grace?

There is so much beauty. I invite you to return again and again to this passage. We can live our lives with the open posture that Jesus demonstrated by being a channel of Christ light just as he was. We can live confident that the Christ light is in each of us and among us and can bring us back to life at every turn. And we can live confident that God continues to form and reform each of us as a work of art – a particular creation of God’s love. This is grace.

And, finally, let’s shift to our reading from the gospel of John. Jesus was talking with Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin (a council of religious leaders in his Jewish community). This passage that we have for today comes right after the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus about the opportunity to be reborn again and again through our faith. We heard:

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Chosen one must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in the Chosen One might have eternal life.” These words “Chosen One,” are articulated in other biblical translations as “Son of Man.” And this phrase (Son of Man or Chosen One) refers back to promises in Hebrew scriptures of a messiah (an anointed one – one to save or deliver the people). And for us in our Christian tradition, Jesus has been a messiah for us because we have been able to see Christ light through him. We further heard these words so well known throughout our tradition:

“Yes, God so loved the world as to give the Only Begotten One, that whoever believes may not die, but have eternal life.” The original Greek for what is translated here as “Only Begotten” is *monogenes*. It means unique or one-of-a-kind. And, indeed, Jesus has been our unique, one-of-a-kind embodiment of God’s grace and love in this world.

Finally, in the passage from John, we also heard these poetic thoughts: *“Whoever believes in the Only Begotten” [that unique, one-of-a-kind embodiment] “avoids judgment, but whoever doesn’t believe is judged already for not believing in the name of the Only Begotten of God... though the light came into the world, people showed they preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil... Indeed, people who do wrong hate the light and avoid it, for fear their actions will be exposed; but people who live by the truth come out into the light, so that it may be plainly seen that what they do is done in God.”*

I would share from my own faith journey and my earlier illustration that, to me, judgment is the recognition – it is the THUNK of falling off the curb. And we do it again and again. That is why we confess our sin – our errors – and look for opportunities for God’s grace to infuse us and lead us back along the homeward journey of love.

Isn’t it interesting that, when we do wrong, it’s because we hate the light and want to avoid it. Our meannesses are so often quiet – are so often jabs at ourselves and at others. But we have the new possibility at every turn of living more into the light of Christ.

So how do we embody grace? The writer of the gospel of John would encourage us to live in the light of truth – of love that is out in the open. Let us do this with all of our ancestors and our community here today as well. Let us embody grace because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21