

Week 1: Simple as that...or is it?
Ephesians 2:1-10
Matthew 7:1-5

Reflections by Sami

What is grace? It seems like such a simple thing, however, when asked, "What is grace?" we often find it's difficult to put into words. I use three images to help people remember the basic definition of grace: a gift, a heart and the infinity symbol. Grace is a gift from God of God's love and that love is never ending. Thus, God will never take that gift back. It is ours no matter how far we stray from God. God will always love us. It is because of that love God forgives us, gives mercy, justice, peace, and the list goes on and on.

There is nothing we can do to lose God's gift of grace and there is nothing we can do to earn it. As Eph. 2:8-9 says, "and even that is not of yourselves, but the gift of God. Nor is it a reward for anything that you have done..." (The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation). That blows our minds because that is not the way the world works. The world says if you betray me, you have to earn my trust back. You have to earn my love back. God doesn't say that. Earn. It's how the world works. We earn a living. We earn the good things we have. We've worked hard for them and we have earned them. So it makes sense we think we have to earn grace. We have to work hard at our faith; attending bible studies and worship every week. We have to be a good person and make sure everyone else knows it so God favors us over others. That's not how grace works. We've talked about what grace is but we haven't talked about what alone means. Alone means that it's not grace and good works or grace and following God's commandments or grace and being better than the person sitting next to you. It's just grace. It's grace *alone!*

Now that we know what "Grace Alone," the theme of this series means, let's take a minute and think about what life would look like without Grace Alone. We would still have to give sacrifices to God for God to grant us God's forgiveness. We would still have to show our obedience to God for God to give us God's favor. Our lives would be consumed with worry about whether or not God favored us thus would give us good things. We would worry that our next step, our next decision would offend God and we would fear the consequences. We would live with fear, worry, guilt, shame... God doesn't want us to live that way. First, because that way of living is living a dead life. God wants our lives to be fuller than that. And second, God has other important work for us to do that doesn't include worrying about our relationship with God. God took care of our relationship on the cross. God conquered sin and death so nothing could ever separate us from the love of God.

As we read Matthew 7, it's tempting to read that God will judge you the same way you judge others. Jesus says, "Your judgment on others will be the judgment you receive. The measure you use will be used to measure you." We just got done talking about God's grace and that doesn't seem very loving. But where does it say that God will be doing the judging? Perhaps it's a warning from Jesus. If I were to say, "Wow, that lady is really fat." It's almost reactionary to say, "Well you're not a super-model either!" When we openly judge others, it's almost human

nature to judge the person who is speaking as if they could be a hypocrite. Jesus is warning us not to judge others because that opens the door for us to be judged. He goes on to say we should remove the log from our eyes before judging the speck in someone else's eye. Well friends, when do you think we have officially removed the log from our eye making it alright to judge someone else. I mean, we just talked about our old sinful, selfish, horrible selves and how easy it is to regress back to that person. We thank God for grace because we so often go back to being that person we don't want to be. I think the point Jesus is saying is that it's God's job to judge because we are never in a place where we can judge without being a total hypocrite. Leave the judging to God.

Week 2: A Different Way of Living

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Romans 6:1-13

Reflections by Sami

Since grace is never ending, there was never a time when we didn't have grace. That means, yes, grace abounded in the Hebrew scriptures as well. I talked to a woman in my community who is a reformed Jew and she explained grace within the context of Judaism is more about God's mercy and justice. In the Jeremiah text, the people of the southern kingdom of Judah have been exiled to Babylon. The temple is destroyed, which is central to how they practice their faith. How are they supposed to do that without the temple? How are they supposed to be Jewish outside of Jerusalem? God assures the people through the prophet Jeremiah that God has never and will never give up on the people. God is going to keep the covenant God made with Abraham and Sarah, however, God is going to add onto it with a new covenant. God didn't take back God's gift of grace when the Israelites turned their backs on God or when they disobeyed God. God's grace will never end.

Wait a minute, so if I go out and murder someone, God will still love and forgive me? Yes. That is amazing! I can go and sin as much as I want, and God will still forgive me. Yes. And this is exactly what the Roman church thought when they started to learn about grace. Remember, traditionally in the Jewish faith, when the people sinned, they had to do something to earn God's favor back. And to keep God's favor, they had to obey the laws, such as the purity laws. They had to eat kosher. Now, God is saying they don't have to do anything. Grace is the gift of God's love that will never end no matter what. So of course, they think of the freedom they now have. No more requirements. FREEDOM! They have become college freshmen and want to go out and spread their wings.

But here, Paul says why would you want to? Why would you want to go and live a life of sin that is full of worry that someone will find out what you did? Why would you want to live with shame, guilt, and fear? Because that is what will happen if we believe in God. We know we are doing wrong and hurting others. When we live by our sinful, selfish desires, we are not living life to the fullest. Paul says to the Romans, Jesus gives us a new life. Why in the world, if we believe in Jesus Christ and the grace of God, would we EVER want to live in sin and death. No friends, we

want to be free from that old life and live into this new life in Jesus Christ that is full of joy and possibility.

Paul writes in verse 13, “don’t offer the members of your body to sin as weapons of injustice anymore. Rather, offer yourselves to God as people alive from the dead, and your bodies to God as weapons for justice.” Ah and there it is. What are we supposed to do with new life? How are we supposed to live now that we are freed from sin and death by grace? We are to go out into the world and be weapons or instruments of justice. We are to go out in the world and show others the same grace God has shown us. But that sounds easier than it is because we don’t all agree on how to show grace.

**Here you can talk about recent events of injustice and how we can show grace to those we agree *and* those we do not.

Reflections by Sarah

Week 3: Responding to This Gift

Philemon 1:8-21

James 2:14-20

Reflections by Sami

Paul writes to Philemon, who is one of his disciples. We know Paul and Philemon are close and hold each other in high regard from Paul’s greeting. Paul wants Philemon to welcome back Onesimus. Now, we aren’t sure if Onesimus is a slave or indebted to Philemon. All we know is he ran away from Philemon and found his way to Paul. He has served Paul who is most likely in prison at this time. Paul loves and has found Onesimus very useful (which is what Onesimus means). Paul *could* tell Philemon to welcome Onesimus back but Paul hopes that he doesn’t have to because of Philemon’s love for God. Because Philemon loves God and knows God’s grace, Paul’s hope is that he will show the same grace to Onesimus, who has wronged him.

Paul trusts in the faith of Philemon to do what is right, which is to welcome Onesimus back into the community and to do it as an equal! The writer of James explains in verse 18, “... I’ll prove to you that I have faith by showing you my good deeds. Now you prove to me that you have faith without any good deeds to show.” We can’t because if we believe in the greatest commandment to love God and love others, we can’t help but show others grace. We can’t judge, hold grudges, leave someone hungry and cold. We can’t *because* of our faith. Now, Martin Luther was nervous we would read James and think it supports the idea of earning grace. We have to do good works because our faith tells us to *in order to*. Ah, the writer of James never says that! It says you have faith and don’t do good works. It’s impossible. Our good works don’t earn us anything. We do them because God says to love others so that is what we do.

Now, our hope is that Philemon shows Onesimus grace. We want a happy ending, though we don’t know if he does. What we do know is the decision for Philemon is not an easy one. Think about this situation as a plantation owner deciding whether or not he will welcome back his

runaway slave not only into his employ but into his faith community as an equal! What would the other plantation owners say? What would the other slaves say? Responding to God's gift of grace by showing others that same grace is beautiful and dangerous, which we will talk about more next week.

Week 4: Gracious Moments

Acts 1:6-14

Luke 1:46-55

John 2:1-5

Reflections from Sami

Theme of this week is "Moments of Grace" to help us recognize moments of grace in the Bible so, perhaps, we can see such moments in our own lives. Often, we get so caught up in life; in its busy-ness, in our own desires, in the chaos that we call life that we don't notice important moments of grace or moments we need to show grace. Today, we slow down and try to find moments of grace in the actions of women in the Bible.

We know Jesus was born to a 14-year-old girl named Mary who was unwed. The Holy Spirit came to her and told her she would have a baby and it would be the Messiah. Can you imagine what she was feeling as an unwed, teenaged girl? Yet she responded with what is known as Mary's Song or the "Magnificat," which is Latin for magnify or glorify. It's crazy that Mary could sing such a song with this news from God. When Jesus was born, there was huge upheaval in Galilee. Herod the Great had just died and a group of Jewish people decided they would try to take the land back from Rome amid the transition. However, they lost. Of course, after the rebellion, Rome made life horrible for Jewish people to make sure they would never revolt again. The Jewish people believed that the only thing that could save them from this unjust power was God's intervention. God is going to do this through Mary's son and friends, we know from her song, Mary knew she was giving birth to the Messiah.

And this can't be more evident than in the story of the wedding at Cana. I love when Mary tells Jesus what to do. She tells the Messiah what to do! She is amazing. Mary, Jesus and the disciples have been invited to a wedding and the wine runs out. This brings great shame on the couple and their families. It's a HUGE deal. Mary tells Jesus to help and Jesus replies, "This is not our problem and it's not time for me to reveal I am the Messiah, yet!" Mary doesn't argue with him. She doesn't try to convince him to help. She doesn't even talk to Jesus. She just looks at someone and says, "Do whatever he says." Mary wants to show the family grace and she knows her son and what he can do and she knows it's the right thing to do. And Jesus does it! He doesn't get upset with her or argue with her. He honors her in a time when women were not honored. It's possible that, by this time, Mary was a widow. We don't hear anything about Joseph during Jesus' ministry, so it's possible he has died, and Mary is a widow. Women and especially widows had very low social status and yet, Jesus honors them.

We also see that in the Acts reading in the list of everyone who was present when Jesus ascended. Luke says it was the 11 disciples but, "also in their company were some of the

women who followed Jesus, his mother Mary, and some of Jesus' sisters and brothers." Jesus had women who were disciples. Let me say that again because some of us may have never thought about that before. Jesus had women who were disciples. Jesus included and honored women throughout his lifetime!

How do we show women grace, today? Jesus was intentional about including women. One way we...

Celebrating women in the Bible and in our lives is another way to show women grace. We are going to sing a song called, "God of Women," (Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, OneLicense) that celebrates the accomplishments of women in the Bible and how they inspire our faith, today.