1/23-24/21 Courage to be Gracious Rev. Amy Haines

Phil 1:2-14

Think about the week ahead. Think of everyone you may possibly encounter face to face,

or speak with over the phone, or be with on a Zoom call, or text. What if, in every conversation this week, you began with thanking that person for being a part of your life? What if, after every conversation, you spoke a prayer of gratitude to God for that person?

Would this be easy to do for some, and harder with others? If you did so, how would your interactions change with that person? How would your attitude change toward that person?

How would your prayer life change?

Today, we hear the beginning of the apostle Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi, and Paul begins in gratitude and in grace. He thanks these faithful friends for being partners in the ministry of the gospel of Christ Jesus. He offers praise to God for their practical and prayerful ways as he sits in prison, longing to see them while experiencing their long-distance support.

He encourages them in their faith.

I confess, if I were Paul, sitting in a dank prison cell, I may not feel so gracious or thankful or hopeful. Paul could have easily felt like he deserved his prison sentence, having been one who persecuted Christians before Christ came to him. He could have easily felt defeated or jaded,

believing God had more work for him to do outside those prison walls.

I confess, there are days now when I grumble more than express my gratitude. I snap at my kids. I get frustrated by complacency in ministry. I am appalled at what other Christians have the gall to post on social media. I struggle with the deep divisions evident in our country and in our denomination. I am baffled by the vastly different ways we interpret scripture and define love of neighbor. I recognize how hard it is for me to be gracious, let alone express gratitude,

to those with whom I strongly disagree.

Then I think of other Christians who have not only offered grace, but also forgiveness. Those who have chosen the path of love not hate. Those who have chosen to let go of resentment and hurt rather than plan out retaliation or revenge. Those who have followed well the example of Jesus.

I think of parents who forgive the drunk driver who killed their son. POWs who let go of their anger at their captors. A neighbor refusing to speak ill of another neighbor whose gossip has sown distrust. Church members who disagree on everything except sharing Christ through service to their community.

After the political discord of the past few weeks in our country, my mind remembers the example of forgiveness and grace of Nelson Mandela.

When he was sworn in as President of South Africa in 1994, the moment was significant not only for a person of color to become head of state after years of segregation but also for the ways he graciously included his former adversaries in his government. These were the same men who had imprisoned him for 27 years, treating him as a public enemy. Yet on the day of his inauguration, the same police and correctional officers who had imprisoned him now walked alongside his car as his escorts.

-adapted from Stuart Strachan Jr., thepastorsworkshop.com:forgiveness

Who has been an example of forgiveness to you? Who has offered you a new beginning even when you know you didn’t deserve it? Who has been your witness to grace?

As Paul encouraged the church at Philippi, Paul encourages us today: have the courage to receive God’s grace through faith in Jesus. Then have the courage to share grace with others.

We cannot share what we do not know, so first we must have the courage to welcome the grace of God in our lives, God’s unconditional forgiveness and love that is offered to each and every one of us.

Grace is foundational for our journeys of faith. As John Wesley taught, God’s grace is always with us, from birth to death. First, grace calls us to faith in Jesus, then forgives us through our acceptance of faith in Jesus, then continually guides us to live more like Jesus.

Grace is what makes the Christian faith unique.

This conviction was once affirmed by author C. S. Lewis who one day happened to wander into

the midst of a discussion on comparative religions. The experts were debating what, if anything, was unique to the Christian faith. When Lewis heard his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions, Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

After some discussion, the experts had to agree. The notion of God’s love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, and the Muslim code of law —

each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God’s love unconditional.

--adapted from *Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace?, Zondervan Publishing.* thepastorsworkshop.com:grace

As I said two weeks ago as we began this sermon series, we don’t have to earn God’s love.

God claims us as beloved sons and daughters before we ever utter a word in witness or love another in the name of Jesus.

God loves us simply because of who we are to God, not because of anything we do or say for Christ. God forgives us of our sin because it is God’s nature to forgive. God loves us because it is God’s nature to love. And God calls us to faith because God seeks to be in an eternal, abiding relationship with us.

What we do in faith is our response to God’s grace. Our faith finds expression in our love of God and love of neighbor. Our faith finds expression in the ways we reflect Christ’s ways through our ways. Our faith find expression when we forgive and love and offer grace to one another and all around us.

Yes, living by grace is not easy. But as Karl Barth once said,

“Grace must find expression in life, otherwise it is not grace.”

--thepastorsworkshop.com:grace

God offers us grace so that we can offer grace to others. Our faith in Jesus may be grounded in a personal relationship with our Savior, but such faith must be lived out in relationship with and for others. Christianity is communal, as we are all part of the greater body of Christ called the church.

Paul honored the faithful men and women in the church at Philippi because they not only received the good news of Jesus, they lived out Jesus’ ways as their ways. They cared for their neighbors. They cared for Paul. They spoke of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. They spoke of the joy of knowing Jesus.

Paul gave thanks from his prison cell because even there, the Gospel was being proclaimed.

And his imprisonment empowered others to be bold and courageous as they lived by faith.

When Paul landed in a Roman prison because he refused to keep quiet and refused to stop proclaiming Christ crucified and risen, he knew he was not alone. God was with him.

God was with the early church. And they were with Paul in spirit.

Paul not only thanked God for their presence, Paul also prayed that they would continue to live

by love and wisdom and spiritual insight, even when Paul was no longer with them. As Paul proclaimed: **“**I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” (v6)

How often in the church do we lose confidence, as leaders change and plans adapt? How much have we struggled in this past year with what we cannot do, doubting that God can still do a good work through us, struggling with the possibility that God is preparing us for a new work yet to come?

As Paul encouraged the church in Philippi, Paul encourages us today. Take heart! God is still with us! We, too, still share in God’s grace, with Paul, with our faith ancestors, with one another.

The early Christians stood by Paul whether he was proclaiming Christ on a riverbank or in a courtroom. They were not fair-weather friends who ran at the first sign of struggle. They were not Christians simply for social status, but Christians willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the gospel. Paul gave thanks for the ways the grace and love of God held them together, even when they had to be courageous to live for Jesus.

Throughout this letter, the Philippians are reminded of the grace of God at the core of their Christian faith. Grace that reminded them they were God’s beloved. Grace that encouraged them to live by unity, in the same mind of Christ. Grace that met them in their darkness and trials and grief in order to bring them into the light and love and mercy of Christ. Paul knew that they could not stand firm in faith alone. And neither can we. Grace is the foundation of our faith, from which we then extend grace to others.

Living by grace is not easy. We cannot forgive out of our own strength. We cannot love out of our own hearts. Left to our devices, we dismiss and divide, we shame and step away from one another. Living by grace takes the power of God moving in and through and among us, as Christians and as the Christian community.

..In the 19th century two popular London preachers were Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker.

On one occasion, Parker commented on the poor condition of children admitted to Spurgeon's orphanage. It was reported to Spurgeon however, that Parker had criticized the orphanage itself. Spurgeon then blasted Parker the next week from the pulpit. The attack was printed in the newspapers and became the talk of the town. People flocked to Parker's church the following Sunday to hear his rebuttal.

Parker’s reply was this: "I understand Dr. Spurgeon is not in his pulpit today, and this is the Sunday they use to take an offering for the orphanage. I suggest we take a love offering here instead." The crowd was delighted. The ushers had to empty the collection plates 3 times.

Later that week there was a knock at Parker's study. It was Spurgeon. "You know Parker, you have practiced grace on me,” said a humbled Spurgeon. “You have given me not what I deserved, you have given me what I needed.”

*-*adapted from *Moody Monthly*, December, 1983, p. 81.

-sermonillustrations.com:grace

Consider all the ways we experience grace.

We experience grace when in small groups our vulnerability is welcomed when we admit all that we don’t know, or we confess our doubts, or ask questions to seek a better understanding of faith. There are many times small groups become cliques instead of support groups,

times when we judge one another rather than listen to one another.

We experience grace when someone we have hurt forgives us. Sometimes our hurt is intentional; sometimes our hurt comes from an offhand comment or words taken out of context. While restoration of the torn relationship takes time, God yearns to see our reconciliation, one with another.

We experience grace every time we partake together in the bread and cup of Holy Communion.

As we remember Jesus’ sacrifice for us, we once more remember the depth of God’s love, forgiveness and grace.

We experience grace when we are welcomed by those not like us. In so many places today and in so many ways, we are encouraged to spend time only with those who think or act or believe in the same way we do. And yet, heaven will be very diverse. And the church, in its best form,

is diverse in background and thought and welcome and action. So, we experience grace when welcomed into the body of Christ by those we have little in common with. We experience grace when we welcome others who are different from us.

We experience grace when we serve together, when we seek to share Christ’s love through our care for others.

What do all of our experiences of grace have in common? A willingness to live by faith.

A willingness to be in relationship with others. A willingness to trust God’s guidance.

A willingness to be courageous, stepping out of our comfort zones.

Courage begins in vulnerability, willing to step out and do for others what God has done for us.

Courage begins in grace, sharing with others the grace that we have received. Courage does not make us superheroes, but gives us the strength to do what we are called to do.

Are we willing to live by courage? Are we willing to make the choice to live by faith? Are we willing to remember who we are in Christ? Are we willing to receive and share God’s grace?

This is God’s call to us today, a call to grace-filled living. May we live into this call, knowing that God is still with us. Amen.