



06 February – 12 February 2022

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Last week we explored grace and recognised that grace includes both God's invitation to life and God's confrontation of all that robs us of life. This week we are challenged to decide how we will respond to this grace.

In worship this week you may read of Peter's call to be a "fisher of people" in Luke's Gospel, or you may hear of Isaiah's famous "Here I am, send me!" response to God's call. All of the Lectionary readings include this sense that to respond to grace is to hear and accept the call of God to partner with God in God's gracious, saving mission. But, in order to respond to God's call, and in order to be carriers of grace to the world, we need to have experienced and received God's grace for ourselves. This means that we need to know what it is to accept God's invitation into abundant life in Christ. It also means that we need to be willing to allow God graciously to confront anything in us that would rob us of life, or that would cause us to rob others of life in anyway. We are invited to experience forgiveness and love, and we are called to share forgiveness and love with those around us. We are called to confront and transform the brokenness and destructiveness within us, and we are called to stand against brokenness, destructiveness, and injustice in the world around us.

The invitation to receive grace, and the call to share it, is at the heart of our meditations this week.

SUNDAY 06 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: Luke 5:1-11

Reflect: It is fairly common, when followers of Jesus seek to share their faith with others, to begin with how sinful we are, and to call people to repentance in order to receive God's grace. Apart from the

challenge this poses to our "salvation by grace" theology – since it makes a prayer of repentance a pre-requisite for receiving grace – this also contradicts much of what we see in Scripture. In the ministry of Jesus, salvation always works in the opposite direction. Instead of demanding repentance before we receive grace, God often pours out grace on us, which then leads us to become aware of our need to repent. To put it another way, repentance is a response to grace, not a pre-requisite of it.

In today's reading, Jesus borrows Peter's boat to preach and then invites him on a fishing trip. Peter, who is sceptical of this carpenter's knowledge of fishing, tries to talk him out of it, but finally relents. The result is that he and his partners bring in a massive catch of fish. This is a gift of grace which Jesus gives to Peter and his friends. Notice that there is no prayer, no repentance, no change of behaviour in Peter that comes before this. The gift of grace comes first. Then, in response, Peter confesses to Jesus that he is a sinful man and asks Jesus to leave. But Jesus only responds with more grace, calling Peter to share the grace he has just received with others. This is how grace works. We need only receive it.

What grace do you need to receive from God today? How can you share that grace with those around you?

Do: Receiving is not often thought of as a Christian practice, but it is. Sometimes we receive gifts from others and need to learn to receive with grace and appreciation. Sometimes we need to make time to relax, open our hearts and minds, and simply receive grace from God. Stillness and openness are the physical practices that lead us into the spiritual practice of receiving. Why not give this a try today?

Pray: I receive, with thanks and humility, the amazing, undeserved grace you offer me today, O God.

MONDAY 07 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Reflect: So often we associate the move of the Spirit, the call of God, and the work of grace in terms of spontaneity, unpredictability, and even a kind of chaotic quality. In many church circles the

concept of order is associated with dryness, lifelessness, and a quenching of the Spirit. But, here, as Paul teaches the church about their worship life together, and he calls them to bring all their various gifts into worship to build up the church, he calls for order.

Paul's instruction to respect one another, to make space for one another, and to allow order to protect our relationships and the dignity of each person, is important when we speak of receiving and sharing grace. The command for women to keep silent may seem like the opposite of grace, but we know that in other churches women did speak and teach. The key is verse 35 where he asks the women not to disrupt the meeting with questions. When we remember that in the ancient world women did not receive education as men did, it makes sense that they would have questions. But it would be disruptive and disrespectful for there to be conversations happening around the church while someone was trying to teach or prophesy. To apply this passage to all women in all times and places would be to go against the inclusive, affirming spirit of Paul's teaching, and the grace and call of God that are extended to all.

God's call is never an excuse to ignore the needs of others. God's call is related to community, and to building up the church. As we receive grace today and give thanks for the gifts God has given us, let's also reflect on how God may be calling us to share that grace respectfully and selflessly with those around us.

Do: Reflection on our lives – both within us and in the world around us – is always an important part of our discipleship. The Ignatian practice of *examen* can be a helpful tool, as we make time at the start and end of each day to reflect on our interactions and actions through the day, and on our thoughts and feelings. Today, use the *examen* to reflect on God's calling to receive and share grace in your life.

Pray: As I receive your grace, O God, may I share it respectfully in whatever way I can.

TUESDAY 08 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: 1 Timothy 3:1-9

Reflect: If we were to be legalistic about the rules for overseers of the church that are laid out here, then there would be very few men (the passage does not address women in leadership) who would qualify. The original language states that leaders should only have been married once, following the ancient belief in some circles that a married person should remain single on the death of their spouse. This alone would be a tough standard to maintain today. Add to this the requirement that the children of church leaders be thoroughly well-behaved, and it becomes clear that these rules would exclude many who are called to ministry today.

Does this mean that we should just ignore the standards and do whatever we want? Of course not. But the point of this passage is not to create a list of hoops for us to jump through. Rather, the passage attempts to quantify what a life of grace looks like, especially those who are called to leadership positions. And since we are all leaders in one way or another, this gracious picture applies to us all. At its heart this passage describes followers of Jesus as people who are kind, considerate of others, welcoming, servant-hearted, and more concerned for the well-being of the church and those in it than they are for their own power or pleasure.

There is not one person who is not called to follow this gracious way of being. If we were all to apply our faith to serving one another, caring for our families, and sharing grace with as many people as possible, our world would be a different place. Who needs you to "lead" them in this way today?

Do: Any step toward becoming more Christlike begins with a decision and a commitment. While it may take time to fully live out the commitment we make to God, the practice of committing, and regularly recommitting, can be a helpful way to keep growing in our faith. Make a new commitment to grace today.

Pray: I accept your call to live with grace, O God, and I commit myself to it.

WEDNESDAY 09 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: Luke 5:27-32

Reflect: The call of Levi offers a challenging contrast between a religious life without grace and a spiritual life full of grace. Who knows what drove Levi to become a tax collector, but it could not have been an easy choice for him. Tax collectors were considered traitors to their people, since they essentially worked for the Roman Empire which occupied Israel. Also, they were free to set their own rates to generate an income for themselves after Rome had received what was required. This meant that many tax collectors got rich by fleecing their countrymen. What kind of early rejection, hurt, or trauma would lead an Israelite to choose a job that would bring such hatred and exclusion from his peers?

When Jesus called Levi, it could perhaps have been the first time in a very long time that anyone had actually seen him as a human being. Certainly, Levi did not seem to hesitate to respond to Jesus' offer of grace and belonging. Furthermore, once Levi had experienced the grace of Jesus, he was desperate to share it, and so he threw a party for all his friends – who were likewise outcasts in that society. This is what grace can do. Unfortunately, the religious leaders did not share Jesus' gracious attitude, referring to Levi and his friends as "scum."

If we are called to be channels of God's grace to the world, then we would do well to follow Jesus, saying no to the self-righteousness and exclusion of the religious leaders, and yes to welcoming the Levi's of the world into God's family. Who needs you to welcome them the way Jesus welcomed Levi?

Do: When we greet each other in church, this is not just a time to say hello. It is meant to be a moment of affirming that God has called us to be a welcoming, gracious community in which all people can find belonging. Sometimes just taking the time to greet someone, with the dignity of looking them in the eye, can be a healing and life-changing experience. Today, try and greet everyone you encounter.

Pray: As you have welcomed me into your grace and love, O God, may I welcome others in your name.

THURSDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: Acts 13:26-34

Reflect: This Sunday the Lectionary calls us into an even deeper commitment to follow Jesus. What the Old Testament called blessings and curses – for either obeying or disobeying God – are better understood in terms of consequences in the light of Jesus' message. Sometimes we may be tempted to view God's grace as a guarantee that we can avoid the consequences of our actions, but as we will see in the week to come, that is not the case.

Nevertheless, the death of Jesus shows us that bad things do happen to good people. But the biblical promise of resurrection offers a richer, fuller, death-conquering life in Christ. As Paul and his companions preached to the people of Antioch of Pisidia, they spoke of God's salvation, this new way of being that God has called all people to in Christ. And they spoke about the resurrection not just as vindication of Jesus in the face of false accusations, but also as an invitation into the life Jesus offers. Sometimes we suffer as a consequence of our own bad choices, and sometimes we suffer as a consequence of the actions of others. But either way, we can find comfort from Jesus' suffering, and cling to the hope of resurrection that is always available in Christ.

How might you embrace resurrection life today?

Do: Confession can sometimes be necessary because we need to face our own brokenness. But sometimes confession can be crying out to God when we are hurt by the brokenness of others. Today confess whatever robs you of life, and open to the new, resurrection life God wants to offer you.

Pray: O God, I open to your life that cannot be quenched, and that is always available.

FRIDAY 11 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: 1 Peter 1:17-2:1

Reflect: We do not seek to live a life of goodness in order to convince God to save us. Rather, it is when we discover that God loves us, and when we experience God's life and grace, that we desire to live a good life. As C.S. Lewis has written, "The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because [God] loves us." The writer of today's

passage makes this same point as he describes Jesus' sacrifice for the sake of love for humanity. Then, as a response to the grace of God in Christ, we are called to live lives of beauty, truth and goodness.

It makes sense that our actions would have consequences. By showing us the power of living a life of love, kindness, and goodness, Jesus invites us to live such that we enjoy the blessed consequences of goodness – deeper connections with others, greater peace within, and a sense of meaning and purpose from participating in God's world-restoring project. Even if we claim to love and worship Jesus, if we fail to follow his way, we cannot expect these consequences to come our way. That is simply the way the world works.

How can you choose to follow the gracious, life-giving way of Jesus a little more intentionally today?

Do: One of the great gifts of praise is that it shifts our focus onto God's goodness, beauty and truth. By doing this, the practice of praise, empowers us to follow the example of Jesus, and enjoy the consequences of a life of live. Try to express praise as much as possible today.

Pray: I praise you, God, for your grace and goodness, and for leading me in your life-giving ways.

SATURDAY 12 FEBRUARY 2022

Read: Psalm 1

Reflect: The opening of the book of Psalms is an invitation to reject any so-called wisdom or way of being that does not align with God's goodness. The reason is simple: following what the Psalm calls wickedness leads to destruction, a deeply broken life, and a deeply broken world. On the other hand, when we embrace God's law, the wisdom and way of being that God seeks for us, the consequence is very different. We experience life, restoration, and fruitfulness.

While this Psalm seems to make the choice all too easy, there are other Psalms of lament in which things are clearly not as easy as they seem here. Good people do suffer. Sometimes, living God's way of grace and love does not lead us into deeper connections and

a more peaceful life. Sometimes, we can embrace beauty, truth and goodness, and still find ourselves in conflict with others, in relationships that are breaking down, and in deep trauma or suffering. This is why it is unwise to read any part of Scripture without considering the whole testimony of the Bible. Nevertheless, it does seem that, even when we experience great pain and grief in our lives, choosing beauty, truth, and goodness do seem to bring greater comfort, a greater chance for healing, and protection from bad reactions that just increase the pain.

Ultimately, we need to choose for ourselves what kind of life we want. Suffering will come to us all, but there is definitely a resurrection, and a resilience that God offers us if we are willing to trust that God's ways truly are the most life-giving way to live.

Do: Psalm 1 speaks of meditating on God's law day and night. While we may not be able to give this much time to reflection on Scripture, there is definitely value in regular Bible reading, especially when we read prayerfully and meditatively, opening ourselves to the voice of the Spirit to guide us as we read. Practice this prayerful Bible reading today.

Pray: I thank you, God, for your guidelines for the best human life, and I meditate on them today.