

“You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

“What is grace, except the presence of the Holy Spirit?” More than a rhetorical question, with these words the Reformer Martin Luther revealed a spiritual truth- a gift that keeps on giving, underserved, unmerited and steady as a river.

Lessons from Luther’s life can always be learned anew, to our benefit. Martin Luther’s early life was a case-study of what it is like to live without grace. Much of his life can be seen as an ‘archetype’ and a model for more of us than we know, people who are perfectionists, or who see life as a constant struggle for achievement. His experience of a life-changing, transformational, ‘aha’ moment turned his life around, and with it much of western history, but it would not have happened had he not doggedly pursued his quest for God’s love and divine approval and found all of his valiant attempts falling short.

Luther’s life serves as an example to understand what God’s grace is all about. A tiny history lesson will help. Brother Martin was extraordinarily successful as a monk. He submitted to the discipline assigned to him, and more. He plunged into prayer, fasting and ascetic practices—going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling winter cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself. He later commented, "If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I."

Though he sought through extreme means to love God fully, he found no consolation. He was increasingly terrified of the wrath of God: "When it is touched by this passing inundation of the eternal, the soul feels and drinks nothing but eternal punishment."

During his years as a monk and a lecturer in theology, whenever Luther read scripture in the original Greek, poring over every word for some glimpse into the mind of God, his eyes would be drawn not to the words grace or faith, but to the word 'righteous'. Who, after all, could "be given grace, or live by faith" but those who were *already* righteous? The text was clear on the matter: "the righteous shall live by faith."

Luther later remarked, "I hated those words, 'the righteousness of God,' by which I had been taught according to the custom of all teachers ... that God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner." Young Luther could not live by faith because he was not righteous—and he knew it.

"At last, meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely grace. Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open."

What Luther found while poring through the letter to the Ephesians is the same thing that the apostle Paul had discovered 1500 years before. It's been said that there is no part of the New Testament with more contemporary relevance than the letter to the Ephesians. This epistle, a 'circular letter' intended for more than one church, was penned to deliver a message of grace to all, Gentiles and Jews, Greeks and Romans; that no-one is the author of their own salvation, but all rely equally and totally on God's free gift of grace to be included as part of the body of Christ in the church. We cannot save ourselves, but God has done it already in Christ.

"What is grace, except the presence of the Holy Spirit?"

This is a basic message for us, core to our self-understanding as Christians, but it is often forgotten or left behind in our daily living.

The best way for us to be reminded about this is by reflecting on how we live & how God arrives in our lives, bidden or unbidden. I have two stories to share what I mean by all this.

Most times, I think, we don't consider ourselves to be bearers of grace. In rare moments we might be recipients of grace, but never bearers.. (no- not me!) Two weeks ago, I was at a preaching conference out west, where some wonderful stories were shared.

There were a number of churches represented with congregation members who serve on PDA teams, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, and some had just returned from working with people in South Florida, having just been hit by Hurricane Irma.

This story was shared at breakfast. It seems that recruiting for PDA isn't always easy. Though people want to help when they can, when it comes right down to it, not everyone can hang sheet rock as good as a pro, and who really wants to be tromping around in raw sewage for a week- or hauling water-logged mattresses and furniture out of weather beaten homes? It's not easy to get volunteers for such hard work... but that's not all of what PDA is really all about. The emotional trauma going through disasters often more than equals the physical wear and tear. Assistance comes to people in many ways.

I talked with Barbara, a 70 year-old grandma and storyteller from Rancho Cordova, California. She has led a storytelling group every other Sunday afternoon for seven years now.

When she was approached to go on this most recent trip, she was taken aback. "What could I possibly do? What could I possibly give?"

Well- the answer fully came to her after she arrived on site in south Florida. For a week, she was paired with a young, single mom, struggling to put her house and life together, after Irma, along with her 1 year-old daughter.

After a basic rebuild of a home, there's still lots to be done, choosing paint colors, new carpet & tile; all kinds of things- and Barbara served as a substitute grandma, holding the baby, changing diapers & sharing stories, many stories, back and forth... and not just of the most recent disaster that blew through, but of life, family and the fortitude it takes to

survive. She discovered that her gift for telling stories (and even more importantly, LISTENING to stories) was a gift that she has, different from others in her group. Almost reluctantly, she recognized herself as a bearer of grace, and is now more ready and willing to share her gift with others... *“What is grace, except the presence of the Holy Spirit?”*

The final story comes from Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, a Jewish physician and storyteller in her own right.

She shares an account about grace in a personal and fundamental way about who we are and how we are valued and precious in God's sight- each and all... It takes a minute- but is worth it.

“My grandfather and I had many discussions about the teachings and principles of Judaism, but I remember only one disagreement. It had to do with the nature of the “minyan.” The idea of a minyan is central to the spiritual life of Jewish people. While anyone can pray at any time, before an official prayer service can be held, there must be at least ten men present. This group of ten men is called a minyan.

“Why, Grandpa?” I would ask, puzzled. Patiently he would then explain the law. It is believed that whenever ten adult men are gathered together in the name of God, God Himself is actually present in the room with them. “Immanent,” my grandfather said. Any room then could become consecrated ground, a holy place where the blessings of the religion could be performed. After five thousand years of persecution and homelessness, nothing could be taken for granted. Holy ground had to be portable.

I was fascinated by this. My grandfather told me that this law was so important that often men were called from their homes to the synagogue because there were fewer than ten men present to pray for the dead, to inscribe a baby into the book of life, or to conduct one of the many rituals that acknowledged life is holy and bound people to God. Once or twice in Russia, he had even gone out into the streets and collared a passing Jew, a total stranger, to complete the circle of ten. One did not refuse such an invitation, said my grandfather. It was considered to be an honored duty.

“But why only men, Grandpa?” I would ask. He hesitated. “The law says ten men”, he responded, slowly. I waited for a further explanation, but he said nothing.

“Isn’t God present when ten women gather together, too?” I asked. Thinking back on it, I imagine this to be a difficult moment for him.

“The law says nothing about this, Neshume-le. It has always been ten men, since the beginning.”

I was astounded. “If something is old, does it have to be true?”

“Certainly not,” he responded.

“Well then, I think that God is there in the room when ten women gather, too.” I stated flatly.

He nodded. “This is not what the law says.” He told me.

We had never disagreed about anything before and I was shaken, but my grandfather seemed quite comfortable with the distance between our beliefs. We never discussed the matter again, and I thought that he had forgotten it.

A few years later he became very sick. In the months before he died, I was allowed to visit him only briefly so as not to tire him out. I was almost seven years old and terribly proud of my reading, so I would read to him from one of his books or we would simply sit quietly together. Sometimes I would hold his hand while he slept. Once after a nap he opened his eyes and looked at me lovingly for a long while. “You are a minyan, all by yourself, Neshume-le,” he told me.

“What is grace, except the presence of the Holy Spirit?”

You are bearers of grace, carrying the presence of the Holy Spirit into the world. Accept it, embrace - and share it, in Jesus' name. Amen.