

Rivers of Grace
Mark 14: 3-9

One week ago today I stood on a ferry crossing the very blue waters of Puget Sound looking at majestic Mount Rainier in the distance. As we made the voyage from the non-stop frenetic noise of Seattle to the slower-paced quiet of Bainbridge Island, I reveled in the warmth of the morning sun, enjoying its touch on my face, soaking in its rays. Then I came home. And it was cold. And there was snow. I felt like I had been plunged back into the depths of the darkness of the winter that does not seem to end. As I wallowed in my seasonal despair, which I do know is temporary, I thought of how easily we get stuck in the current misery of the moment and lose sight of who we are as people of faith. For the disciples those early days with Jesus had been such a positive experience with welcoming crowds, with Jesus' revolutionary teachings of hope, with healings and miracles filling their days and nights. Being a follower of Jesus in those times was to be the joyful light against the darkness of the Roman Empire. Now, as they were in Jerusalem for what would become Jesus' last days, they were acutely aware of the uneasy fear that hung over them all the time now. Jesus' opposition to the Pharisees, scribes, and what they represented as the religious establishment had become increasingly vocal and direct. What they had been taught as priorities in the faith was now called into question, replaced by sometimes difficult-to-understand teachings that challenged all they held dear:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.¹

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.²

In anger Jesus had turned over the money changers' tables in the Temple, in defiance of a long-established practice among the Jews during Passover. Talk of persecution and predictions of death were now a constant in their conversations. Then a woman carrying an alabaster jar of expensive oil walked into the home of a leper, a place where Jesus should never have even been, and God's grace

¹ Matthew 5: 5, 7, 9, 10 NRSV

² Mark 8: 34b NRSV

began to flow. Her presence in such a setting and Jesus' reaction showed them all that even in the darkest of days when it seemed life was spinning out of control there was something that held them together and gave them purpose - the living reality of God's grace in the good news of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was in the home of Simon the leper. That is such a startling statement! Before we get to the unnamed woman and her extravagant ways, we have to get beyond the opening verse of this text. What we know of the cultural norms is that a leper with active disease would not have been allowed to be within the city or be in contact with anyone. There is no way a leper would be hosting a dinner gathering! Perhaps this was a man who had been healed by Jesus but would still always have the name of leper because of what had been. We simply don't know. What is certain is that this was a highly unusual setting for what would be an extraordinary evening and an essential part of Jesus' story of hope. Writer and theologian Frederick Buechner said, "The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you." This meal and all that happened around it were the sign of defiant grace and hope that was not only an offered response to their hearts troubled by increasing fear but a proclamation of the Easter that would soon come and the Church, the beloved community, that would arise from the ashes of loss and despair.

A woman dared to come to Jesus with an alabaster jar of the most expensive oil to be found and dispensed it lavishly over Jesus' head. To pour oil on someone's head was an indication of respect, an acknowledgement that this person was to be set apart and considered holy. Generally, it was performed only by priests or royalty and very rarely, if ever, by women. For a woman to interrupt a dinner at which only males were present was brazen indeed. To do so in such an auspicious display of wealth could only be seen as impudent and shameless. Nard was not only expensive, in this case worth a year's wages, it was also heavily and sweetly scented. The smell would have permeated the room and lingered for days, its persistent odor calling to mind this moment. As often happens when any marginalized person steps beyond societal boundaries, she was harshly criticized, accused of wasting something that could have better been used elsewhere. Yet Jesus applauded her actions and cherished her loving boldness. "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news^s is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be

told in remembrance of her."³ Just when the followers of Jesus needed it, when circumstances were so dire, grace came along to remind them of what was truly important, of the core that would hold them together in community.

This story is repeated in all four gospels, a reflection of its importance in the early church. There are differences from gospel to gospel, but through all the discrepancies lies the central message of a woman who came and showered Jesus with profuse love and who Jesus accepted and welcomed. There was no judgment of her, her character, or her actions - simply recognition and acceptance that she was doing what she could and out of the purest of motives. The traditions and rules of the time and faith were shattered as they gathered in the home of a leper and a woman was received into a man's world performing an action that was viewed as over the top and would even have been considered heretical. It was a time for them to take in a deep breath of the sweet perfume, to recognize the value of the person in front of them and the people around them, to join their hearts as one in a community of God's unfathomable grace. This was the Church as it was to be. It was a reminder that "church isn't about order or quiet or even ritual so much as it is about showing up. For [ourselves], for God, and for the people around [us] who need to feel — just as [we] do — that the blessings and burdens of being a human are not theirs to bear alone."⁴ Church is what we create when we come together in loving acceptance of the other and in recognition that we are all in need of grace. It was exactly what they would need to face the days to come with Jesus' brutal death, with the joyous confusion of an empty tomb, and with the glaring unknown of a future they could not even conceive or understand.

Our times are different indeed, yet in many ways just as uncertain and frightening. Whether it is a winter that seems to not want to concede to the glories of spring or the constant boiling of political turmoil that keeps us all uneasy and unsure, we are like the disciples in that the future ahead is not clearly delineated. Church as we have known it is shifting quickly in unexplored directions and taking on new shapes that would cause our parents and grandparents great alarm. As a congregation we feel the changes in our bodies, in this community, in the world around us, and sometimes it can be difficult not to panic and withdraw. In defiance of what might be expected from all sides, we continue to come together

³ Mark 14: 9 NRSV

⁴ <https://onbeing.org/blog/erin-white-church-is-what-we-create-with-each-other>

in this place to be the people and community we were created to be. It is here that God's grace walks into the room and pours over us all, reminding us of who we are and how we are to live in this world that seems so out of sorts. We are to let that grace soak into our very souls, daring to open our hearts so that we feel both loved and welcomed and then extend that same experience to everyone. When we do so, we are creating Church, God's beloved community.

In her book *Gravity and Grace*, Simone Weil wrote, "Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void."⁵ That is our challenge - to become aware of and open up the spaces to receive God's effusive grace that is the very presence of God knitting us together into more than we could ever imagine. For the men gathered in that room, who were no doubt surprised to find themselves in such a place as the home of a leper, they were equally astounded when Jesus welcomed such a bold, cheeky woman in their midst and then paid homage to *her* and her actions. That is what grace does: it allows community to be created in unlikely places and with unexpected people. When God's grace seeps into our beings, we ourselves become part of that creative process in letting the Church become as God has always meant it to be. Grace brings heaven to earth and brings in a startling new reality to living.

It can be so difficult to let ourselves be loved as Jesus loved that woman on that evening, to accept ourselves as we are as Jesus did her, to see beyond the societal expectations that are placed upon us and focus on the motivations of our hearts and the actions that can result from them as Jesus did with her. Though humbling, it is easy to *talk* about the grace of God that restores us to our true selves. It is not so simple to let that grace into the darkest recesses of our souls. Yet that is what we must dare do. For until we allow that grace to become part of the fabric of our beings, we cannot authentically be that grace for others.

Ten years ago a book was published that created controversy among some Christian circles because of the way God was portrayed. In *The Shack*, lead character Mack encounters the Trinity in ways that are unconventional. God the Father, or Papa, was actually an African-American woman named Elousia; the Spirit was an Asian woman Sarayu, which means wind or holy river; and Jesus was

⁵ Simone Weil. *Gravity and Grace*. First published as *La Pesanteur et la grâce*. 1947. English edition - 1952 by Routledge and Kegan Paul.

a Middle Eastern carpenter who seemed more like a 60's hippie.⁶ For Mack that is how God's grace appeared in the midst of a very sad and troubling time of his life. For the disciples grace in the form of a woman was a hard concept for them to grasp. Even though they had seen Jesus' love and compassion in action, it was a different thing altogether when she walked into the room that evening as their world continued to fall in around them. Grace is like that - upending what we think we know, challenging us to consider faith in new ways, daring us to accept and love who we are and who others are as well, giving us the foundation we so desperately crave and need for a world that is so very fragile.

What do we do with the grace that God offers to us? How do we let it become part of who we are? That is the first act of faith - to believe that God can and will make all things new, even ourselves, even others. Anne Lamott wrote, "I do not understand the mystery of grace -- only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us." There is no comprehending it, no analyzing it into pieces and simple steps, grace simply is. Holding that in our hearts, we open ourselves to grace and dare to let it lead us down paths we never thought we could explore, to worlds we didn't even know existed, to love in ways that stretches every fiber of our beings. And we hold on to that grace as we walk through the jungles of life, when it feels we are being assaulted from all sides, when it seems that all that we hold dear is being threatened, when we are not sure we can survive much less go forward. For the disciples that grace would walk with them even as they ran in fear when Jesus was arrested, even when they watched from a distance in shock and disbelief as Jesus died, even when they struggled to understand an empty tomb, even as they created and built the Church against formidable odds. God's grace goes with us as well and leads us on to be God's grace in this world.

Mark's gospel offers a unique perspective on what it means to be a community, God's community. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Our goal is to create a beloved community, and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."⁷ Grace transforms our souls and gives us all we need to become that grace in the reality of the way we love and live in this world. As we move closer to the Cross and to Easter, as we make our way through these

⁶ William P. Young. *The Shack*. Windblown Media. 2007.

⁷ "Nonviolence: The Only Road to Freedom," Martin Luther King, Jr., May 4, 1966.

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/nonviolence-the-only-road-to-freedom/>

daunting days, may we open up the spaces in our hearts, in our souls, in our very beings, and let grace create in and through us God's beloved community - for ourselves, for one another, for the world.

Let us pray. Most holy God, it is staggering when we try to understand your grace. Yet that grace is the core of our being, our heart's very substance. No matter how dark our world might appear, no matter the overwhelming tasks that loom before us, no matter the confusion and uncertainty that might cloud our hearts and minds, let us never forget that grace. Through all the moments of our living, help us to hold on to your surprising grace. Then, help us to choose grace in all our ways and to become your beloved community for the world. Because of Jesus Christ who came so that your grace might be made known we pray. Amen.

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