

Lead with Grace

Grace to you and peace, in the name of Jesus Christ. That's how St. Paul starts his letters in the Bible, whether written with friendly encouragement or to face conflict. As he, more powerfully than anyone else, laid the course of the Christian Way; and as we try to follow Jesus living faith in our time and place, friends, lead with grace.

That word, that witness arose in my mind and heart when I read a book by a son of church members. Grace. Steve is a middle-school principal in a state far away. Early in the year, Ron, the father of a kid in school asked if he'd like an ex-convict to talk with kids about drugs, violence, prison, and the like. Of course, the ex-con was Ron, who counseled inmates about forgiveness, responsibility, and such. One thing leads to another and soon Steve was visiting Death Row. No idea what to expect. His mind seared mental pictures of everything—peeling floor, buckets catching water drips, tiny TV sets high in corners of the common room, showers surrounded by bars, and lines of forearms and hands sticking out, waiting for someone to shake them. So, he did shake those hands that took so many lives in such horrible ways.

Steve's book simply offers conversations shared over six visits. He doesn't cite experts; didn't meet with activists. He doesn't argue for or against the

death penalty or excuse what murderers did. He's grateful they're behind bars. Still, he found goodness, wisdom, even love, as in tears of one inmate said he'd be moving off the row and mixed with joy said he'd miss his companions for 29 years. If you could tell the outside world one thing, Steve asked, what would it be? Two guys he talked with most said:

- Nobody is born a killer. It's learned behavior—I'm living proof of what shaped me, as much as white supremacists in neighboring cells. We got to get to kids early.
- And don't make your judgment about me from one moment, one decision. Yes, it's a culmination, but people you think are worst of the worst still have goodness.

Steve agreed to meet a reporter, knowing likely he'd never get back in. Sure enough, he got shut out, nasty letters, even sued by attorneys of inmates with whom he'd shared such mutual respect. He told his story, hoping others might volunteer to help those condemned. The reporter explained, "He wanted people who will never set foot inside death row to take away that the inmates have done horrible things but they're still human beings." We've all done things we're not proud of. Things we regret. And we're all better than the worst thing we've ever done. Nobody's entire existence should be judged by one incident. Humans change. We learn and typically get better as a result. I've been to death row, Steve concludes. I've learned. I've changed.ⁱ

He never uses the word. Unless I've got it all wrong, he led with grace. And was led into life, even amidst death. Steve's experience may seem extreme relative to our ordinary life. Death row inmates are despised public enemies number one. Still, if grace is so evidently given and received on death row, and if grace is so central to St. Paul whose murderous treatment of the first

followers of Jesus could have landed him behind bars by today's standards, then maybe it's possible in our everyday relationships and rows we hoe. Even among Michigan or State or Ohio State fans. Even with the most annoying aunt or uncle, colleague or neighbor. Even if we cheer on GameStop wallstreetbet-ors or sympathize with hedge-fund investors. Even among polarized partisans in Congress and the news business. Even with a beloved family member from whom we're estranged.

For Jews around Jesus' time, the ultimate enemy would be anyone threatening to undermine, corrupt, or eradicate their way of living faith. Like Romans with secular military and political power. Like Samaritans, actually close cousins who blended Jewish faith with other practices. Pharisees and scribes, by contrast, were paragons of faith, preserving goodness of life as they knew and loved it.

Levi embodies both great public enemies. His very name comes from Levite priests entrusted to lead Temple worship. As a tax collector, he contracted with Roman authorities to collect trade tariffs and travel tolls for anyone passing through. And often, like greedy humans in every age, he could charge a little more and line his own pockets, as long as he paid up to Rome. Corrupt. Hated. Despised.

Mark tells us Jesus is teaching God's Way. Many good people gather round. Class over, he goes along the main road and reaches the toll booth where Levi sits. Offering the same grace to anyone whether friend or foe, Jesus calls Levi. He gets out from behind his bars and leads Jesus to his home for the night. There friends and associates, despicable outcasts according to faith, lounge around listening to Jesus, learning, likely at least a few changing. When the faithful Pharisees protest, Jesus clarifies Holy Grace

isn't so necessary or appreciated by those who think they're righteous. It's powerful for those who know they're sinners. Implying: which do you deem yourselves to be?

Mark doesn't say Jesus dismissed wrongdoing and accepted injustice. He sees in Levi, as in all of us, potential to be better. He calls us from exploitative, selfishly manipulative impulses we all feel to selfless service. When people get lumped into accepted categories of right and wrong and condemned by default, Jesus invites us to think again. To examine more deeply personal morality. To explore more fully behavior that nurtures goodness in society and relationships that empower people to live by God's loving will for life. Long before our theories and seminars, he seems to get polarity management and discerning Holy Wisdom by holding tensions in human norms. Fasting isn't absolutely right or wrong. What's the time and place? What's the motivation? Old ways aren't inherently worthless. New ways aren't always best. How can we savor the essence of what's good, not being rigid and brittle, while allowing for change / new inspiration?

You see, friends, that's life we lead with Grace. Jesus knew well the Sacred Promise and tried to live the Gracious Presence Isaiah conveyed to ancestors centuries before, which we just heard sung.

The LORD, the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable.
God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

(Isaiah 40:28-31)

Babylonians / Chaldeans had conquered Israel and force-marched the people into slavery—faint, weary, powerless indeed. Ironically, as we started today, they were “behind bars” in a caged hopeless death-row kind of experience. And Isaiah proclaims to them the very essence of Sacred Grace in which they can trust. The Holy One who created life in the beginning and brought new life to forebearers of faith in a time not unlike the one they now faced. Hear what the Spirit may say. {read Isaiah 43:14-22, 24b-25 }

As Isaiah tries to lead with grace, he doesn't want to forget the past entirely. To this day Jews root present reality in ancient memory, a lineage of promise from the Holy One, Creator of the world, who made a way for them in the sea. Rather Isaiah urges don't let the recent desolation define present identity. Don't let slavery in Babylon limit vision for what life in Holy Love can bring. Yes, learn from personal choices and ways of society that wearied God with a burden of grief, as Isaiah personifies. And see possibility as God sees, trusting the will of the One who declares I am about to do a new thing! I will forgive sin. I will give hope and renewal like springs of water gushing in a desert wilderness. I will form all people in love until they live to praise Sacred Grace. So, let go of static dogmatic standards to confine and condemn more than create as once intended. Let go of false manipulation for selfish gain or pretense without true devotion. Let go of shame, fear, anxiety ... all to live abundantly, as we perpetuate the ways of grace.

Now let's just pause and note, friends: often in our conversations, whether intimately personal or together in class discussions, you've puzzled, you've longed to really get what “grace” means. What does grace really mean?

Grace is the wonder of existence from ageless stardust to each dawn we awake. Grace is the gift of life we don't originate; we receive in widest big-picture scope and smallest detail noticed. A Divine Spirit of Love animating every breath, pulse and good desire in us, swirling in a synergistic dance of vitality in all creation. Birds singing on a sunny wintery day. Artistic beauties, scientific insights, mystical moments just flowing from deep inside. People healing or advocating for a friend or strangers unknown in personal service and public policy.

When we lead with grace, friends, we fill with gratitude for that gift of life we receive. When we lead with grace we see beyond problems to potential for good and share in symbiotic cycles of selfless service. When we lead with grace we trust the power of Holy Love to bring life out of death, beyond our plans or even conception of what's possible. When we lead with grace that loving power moves us to call or connect sharing concern, to bring a meal, to adapt creatively, compassionately, collaboratively amid a pandemic, that loving power moves us to new expressions of worship, and wise decisions together as we listen and value all voices. When we lead with grace we're inspired by even those deemed public enemies number one: to get to kids early to shape them in positive ways; and to relate with those grown up by savoring what's deeper than the worst thing anyone does.

Maybe more practically particularly, friends, every time we speak or assess or stew in frustration or meet someone like Steve did Ron and Jesus did Levi amid all the bias and preconceptions baked into culture, when we lead with grace we look for the goodness in someone else or a situation first, to frame whatever shortcomings we also see. We try to offer gratitude and complement before any mention of correction. When we raise children. When we support a move from addiction to recovery. When cultivate a

work culture. When we serve together in church. When we try to address polarization, demonization, lies, violent extremism in our own nation.

You see, if we lead with judgment and it colors all we perceive and what others hear us say, friends, it saps the joy, the vitality, the possibility for life to flourish. It leaves us drained, depressed, and sucks down others around us. Grace isn't naïve. Quite the opposite, with grace we get reality clearly. We name what's not right. And by the power of God's Spirit we rise above personal pain, social conflict and condemnation, to seek and to claim what remains good and possible. We know if we hang onto hurts and slights we've received and wrongs we've done we'll continue to suffer and descend into a kind of living hell. So, we choose to seek God's reign of heaven among us and within us, Jesus said, like a bulb blooming or tree blossoming in spring, like a smile that spreads, resurrection that comes.

Now, one last honest personal word of trying to lead with grace. You know, friends, there's definitely a part of me that loves efficiency, precisely because then we use our time, effort, other resources to most nurture life abundant for us and others. And we know life is far from perfect. Sometimes the way things unfold, it seems there's waste in how we've spent time or money—personally or as a church, community, nation. Years ago, when first beginning in ministry, I'd get frustrated at spending time and emotion on what seemed petty conflicts, frustrations, or misunderstandings. I realized our faith doesn't promise life will be perfect bliss. Sin abounds. I accepted that if I'm truly faithful, I must factor in my weekly calendar and daily expectations the need to tend those moments and efforts, and allow for what I deemed "sin time." After a while more, thanks be to God, it struck me: how much better to call it "grace time." To frame and emphasize those realities of being human not just as something wrong and draining, rather as

an opportunity to repair, to renew, to make something right and beautiful again ... if only I could open my heart and center in Holy Love. In one of way of seeing it, grace is wasteful. Inevitably, inherently so. And I believe grace is ultimately our greatest source of hope and eventually of peace.

A daily devotional I often use from the Iona Community inspires me.

With the whole church, we affirm that we are made in God's image [of grace], befriended by Christ, empowered by the Spirit.

With people everywhere, we affirm God's goodness at the heart of humanity, planted more deeply than all that is wrong.

With all creation, we celebrate the miracle and wonder of life, the unfolding purposes of God, forever at work in ourselves and the world.ⁱⁱ

Grace to you and peace, dear beloved friends, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Quoted and abridged from Steve Schonveld, *Front Row on Death Row: Conversations with Convicted Killers* (Charleston, SC: Evening Post Books, 2021), 2-3,106, 109, 112-113,125-126

ⁱⁱ From the *Iona Community Prayer Book*, p 6.