

A Culture of Engagement
Acts 17:16-27
6.3.18



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“How would you define grace? Would you say that you were formed and informed in a ‘grace-full’ environment? Can you recall a time in your life where you were offered a response of grace, when you were bracing for the punishment? How did you feel?”

“How has your own understanding/experience of grace impacted your ability to receive it? To give it?”

“What are some of the ways that our culture resists grace? How does our emphasis on ‘effort’ and ‘ambition’ dilute the nature of grace?”

“What does grace say about God? What does it say about you? Why is it so hard to believe?”

“Is there an area in your life in which a deeper experience of grace might help you concentrate less on your failures and more on the beauty of the life made available in God?”

“Who in your life could use a healthy dose of grace even though they don’t deserve it? How lovely might it be, coming from you?”

Teaching Notes...

Engagement: We are a people who are authentically loving God and compassionately loving our ‘near ones’ in ways which validate our claims of faith in Jesus and compel others to find life in and through him.

“Invitation” and “Reach”

At the very core of our faith--- our Story--- is a God who is easily dismissed, but refuses to be ignored. We have tried, with great imagination and determination, to distance ourselves from God, but he keeps returning to us! With incredible patience and passion, God pursues us. He refuses to coerce us, but simply and vulnerably offers himself to us and awaits that moment when we realize that we are most fully ourselves--- safer with him--- than anyone else.

My big, fat theological conclusion...

People will be less obese when we can figure out a way to make broccoli taste like Peanut M & Ms without forfeiting its nutritional value.

People will be less self-destructive once we figure out a way to make the Kingdom-life more “tempting” than the self-directed and self-abusive life they are currently experiencing... once they get a taste of something better and better for them (Psalm 34:8).

As humans, the solidarity that we all enjoy is our depravity and our innate worth. The wide-ranging consequences of sin in our life and the illogical nature of love. In a word: grace. We know all about consequences and condemnation--- all about keeping the rules and staying within the lines--- but what we don't know is “grace”.

The woman at the well, she knew guilt and broken-heartedness; she knew unfulfilled desire and self-loathing, but until Jesus, what she didn't know was the unpredictable nature of grace. Nothing prepares us for such a response.

Only those who truly understand the outrageous nature of grace can unhesitatingly consent to both their tremendous worth and their undeniable brokenness.

Grace is, first, a word about God.

“... the work assigned to me by the Lord Jesus... to tell others the good news about the wonderful grace of God.” Acts 20:24

One of the things that was affirmed in my study this week was the inadequacy of any attempt to **define** grace. Knowing the *language of origin* and *being able to use it in a sentence* proves less than satisfying.

Most of the biblical concepts which prove transformative defy our attempts at explaining them (e.g. love, mercy, forgiveness, chosenness, etc.) Each must be experienced in order to be understood.

charis- *that which affords delight; favor of the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ; to flourish*

Grace: the unprovoked, self-initiated movement of God toward and in us which both invites and incites transformation.

Grace is objectionable because...

... **it is not sequential.** A, B, C, doesn't lead to D, E, F. It defies the accepted rules and norms.

... **it's an affront to our own presumed goodness.** We don't want to *acknowledge* grace because we don't think we need it. We don't want to *offer* grace because we think others don't deserve it.

... **it discounts our claims of entitlement and our commitment to 'karma'.**

Grace invalidates every attempt at reinventing ourselves or establishing our own value and significance apart from God. We struggle with our name not being mentioned when the *grace-credits* are rolling. This is the primal sin. Self-importance. This is the one that provokes all of the others.

Grace ceases to be grace if it is offered as a compensation for our good behavior. Grace ceases to be grace if it can be "withdrawn" from us due to our inconsistency.

"When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned. But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners." Romans 4:4-8

"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done ..." Ephesians 2:8-10

In order to be grace, it has to come to us in the most unexpected times. It has to come while we're bracing for the lecture or preparing for the disappointed glance. It has to catch us off guard.

But, here's the really good news: It's precisely at those times when we stand with all of the 'props' kicked out from underneath us that we become the most available to grace. It's what makes grace so memorable.

The church, living with a relational encounter of their God, with a compelling vision of life, and with restorative rhythms and practices which are good for the world is the best thing we could do for the culture.

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." Genesis 12:2-3

To say that God loves you despite your brokenness is only partially true. To say that God loves you and will not be content until you are "whole", is only partially true. To say that God loves you, desires your wholeness, and is committed to staying with you

through the process, is only partially true. To say that God loves you despite your brokenness, is committed to your flourishing, and longs to transform you so that you might embody his healing, restorative love to a broken world... that's the truth!

You have very little ability to pass along “blessing” unless you have experienced it yourself.

You will not be able to affirm the “belovedness” of another unless you are able to receive it for yourself (Genesis 15).

There's no point in rehearsing for people a set of moral expectations, prior to the invitation of grace. In so doing, we simply create more anxiety, more condemnation, and a deeper determination to behave their way into relationship with God.

Imagine being commanded to “forgive” (even your enemies), if you have not experienced forgiveness? Imagine attempting to “bless (speak/desire good for) another, without an experience of your own blessing? How do we love others if God has not loved us?

The early followers of Jesus are not being “cajoled” into some formalized activity called “mission” which was an anticipated obligation of belonging. They are simply “witnesses” to what the lingering presence of Jesus was doing in, amongst, and through them “on the way”.

“witness”, in Acts 1, is a noun, not a verb. It's something you are, not something that you simply do. You will be an observable, identifiable expression of the restorative love of God.

Rene Girard calls the Bible, “*a text in travail*”. It doesn't offer a list of tidy, irrefutable conclusions, but offers stories of a people attempting to (struggling to) live into *this* Story, in ways that were faithful to its intent and relevant to its present place in history.

Think of how many people, historically, have functioned under the partiality of revelation? How they were being asked to respond based on the level of revelation available to them, at the present?

In the Story, we meet this concept of ‘**atonement**’: It is a multi-faceted concept which means, “*to cleanse, to make reconciliation, to cancel a debt, to forgive*”.

Atonement is every movement of God toward his creation motivated by his loving-purpose of setting things right.

In antiquity, people processed this notion, in part, through a complicated system of rituals and sacrifices. In the sacrifice, there was the sense of identification--- that somehow what was happening in the process was a dramatic portrayal of their own sin and guilt, but also of the hope of forgiveness because of a life being offered in-place-of theirs.

There was a sense that because of the sacrifice, you were no longer identified by your sin (not that you hadn't done it, but that it would not be held against you). What they couldn't readily identify was how the sacrificial system was symbolic of self-giving love of God. It wasn't just something they did for God, but a picture of something God would do for them.

The biographers are all suggesting that what we are watching in the Jesus narrative, in often encrypted ways, is God himself (with skin: incarnation) entering our dilemma--- meeting us at the place of our pain and ruin and suffering--- and actually taking it upon himself so that we might experience the life for which we were created.

Discovery: We are a people who are being informed and formed by the biblical narrative and who are developing both a strong sense of identity (*who* we are), and a deep sense of purpose (*why* we are) within the Story of a loving and faithful God.

“Revelation” and “Incarnation”

“... this is the way; walk in it.” Isaiah 30:21

[Deuteronomy 29:29; John 20:30-31; Psalm 119:15-16; 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:20-21]

Encounter: We are a people who intentionally make ourselves “*present to*” and “*present for*” God in order that we might know him and respond in obedience to his loving initiatives.

“Glory” and “Worship”

“Honor the LORD for the glory of his name. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.” Psalm 29:2

[Genesis 3:8; Exodus 19:3; Isaiah 6:1-8; Jeremiah 29:13-14; Matthew 28:17; Mark 5:6]

Surrender: We are a people who are learning to trust in God’s goodness and his good intentions for us and who are courageously and voluntarily living into his will for us.

“Truth” and “Repentance”

“From then on, Jesus began to tell people, ‘Turn to God and change the way you think and act, because the Kingdom of heaven is near.’” Matthew 4:17

[Isaiah 30:15; Jeremiah 31:19; Matthew 3:8; Mark 1:15; Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 7:8-10]

Integration: We are a people who are committed to seeing, honoring, and welcoming the “stranger” in ways which encourage healthy inter-dependence and compel others to participate in transformative community.

“Reconciliation” and “Hospitality”

“If anyone belongs to Christ, there is a new creation. The old things have gone; everything is made new!

So, we have been sent to speak for Christ...” 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

[Exodus 22:21; Romans 12:9-13; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 1:20-22; 1 Timothy 3:2; Hebrews 13:1-2]

Restoration: We are a people who share in God’s work of healing, renewing, and restoring the world so that it increasingly becomes a better reflection of the wholeness (“shalom”) for which it was created.

“Justice” and “Generosity”

“... generously offer food to the hungry and meet the needs of the person in trouble; then your light will rise in the darkness, and your gloom become like noon.” Isaiah 58:10

[Deuteronomy 15:7-8; Psalm 33:5; 112:5; Isaiah 40:29; 61:8; Micah 6:8; Luke 6:35-36; 2 Corinthians 9:11]

Engagement: We are a people who are authentically loving God and compassionately loving our ‘near ones’ in ways which validate our claims of faith in Jesus and compel others to find life in and through him.

“Invitation” and “Reach”

“God did this so that people would seek him. Then perhaps they would reach out for him and find him.

They would find him even though he is not far from any of us.” Acts 17:27

[John 3:16-18; Acts 10:39-43; 28:28-31; Romans 1:16-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:8; 1 Peter 2:12]