

Here I am

Christ Church 12 Mar 2017

Exodus 33: 12-18 NRSV

12 Moses said to the Lord, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' 13 Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." 14 He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." 15 And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. 16 For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

17 The Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." 18 Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray."

"Please show me your glorious presence." CEB

Lent is the holy time before Easter when we pause. Our lives are a constant... what-next. We are sometimes consumed by all our *shoulds* and *oughts*. We forget to slow down and notice.... notice other people, their needs, notice what is going on around us... notice the beauty and abundance.... notice the possibilities for kindness and justice. We get completely wrapped up in our what-nexts.... and forget to pause. During Lent, we remember to breathe, and intentionally prepare ourselves for the rebirth and renewal of Easter. We go into our tool bag of spiritual practices of prayer and meditation, being present, giving generously and service to others. Thus equipped, we can consciously respond with awareness and gratitude for God's unfailing grace.

What is this grace that is mentioned in scripture and hymns and regularly on the lips of the faithful. Grace is God's unearned, ever-present, unconditional love.

One of my spiritual gurus, Anne Lamott, in her book Traveling Mercies, describes Grace in this way -

Grace is that force that infuses our lives and keeps letting us off the hook. It is unearned love... the love that goes before, that greets us on the way. It's the help you receive when you have no bright ideas left, when you are empty and desperate and have discovered that your best thinking and most charming charm have failed you . Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others who are as startled and embarrassed and eventually grateful as you are to be there.

I don't know why life isn't constructed to be seamless and safe, why we make such glaring mistakes, things fall so short of our expectations, and our hearts get broken and our kids do scary things and our parents get old ... I don't know why it's not more like it is in the movies, why things don't come out neatly and lessons can't be learned when you're in the mood for learning them, why love and grace often come in such motley packaging.

I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.

Thank you, Anne. All of us are worthy of God's Grace. All of us are recipients. Our part is to pause and notice. And that's the rub.

In our scripture this morning, it seems like Moses needs some help understanding this. He is expressing his doubts and concerns. He's not sure that God is fully present and paying attention to what he is asking for. Hear again the scripture paraphrased.... just a bit

12 Moses said to God, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'[you want me to guide them to the promised land]; but you haven't let me know whom you will send with me. [You haven't given me all the information I need, God. How am I supposed to

do this? Yes, you have tried to assure me] and you've said, 'I know you by name,' and that I have found favor in your sight. 13 So, if you really think I'm so special and capable, please show me your ways [but you've got to show me more clearly. How am I to know it's you?] ." 14 God said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." 15 Then Moses said to God [again, how will we know you are present with us?...]

17 [Now **I'm** thinking, God must be feeling pretty exasperated here] So God repeats to Moses again, "I [promise I am here for you]... [you are my beloved]... you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." 18 Moses asked again, "Please show me your glorious presence."

Seems to me that Moses is expecting another burning bush or some wondrous tablets from high on the mountain top to fully trust that God is present. And we do too. We are often blind to the beauty and miracles right here in our midst... clouded over by our fears and concerns and busy-ness.

Paul knew we needed help and reassurance when he wrote in Romans 8: 38-39 - "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God."

God's grace is ever available, because God is ever available. Nothing can separate us from God.... except our own inattention. We are distracted. We have too much going on, too many things to do. Lent is a time to lay some of these things down and more fully live within the loving and healing cocoon of God's grace. There we are better able to feel God's warmth and support. And held by this love, we are more prepared to pass it on.... for surely, as Christians, that is what Jesus calls us to do, over and over again.... to love others, to be of service. One way we respond to God's grace in our lives is to pay it forward.... pass it on. And

today, that's about being there for others, as God is there for us.... Offering our presence.

The experience of the presence of someone who is truly and completely there for us is actually a very rare and precious gift. Sometimes I think we humans are programmed from birth and throughout our life experiences to want to fix things. Of course, there is a time and place for this creativity and invention. But there is also the need for us to discover our own answers and allow others to do the same. For this to occur it's helpful when someone really listens to us, and puts all ideas of fixing and helping aside. People will often say, "Well, I really didn't know what to do, so I **just** listened." This is actually one of the most precious gifts we can offer.... a listening ear. This is often just what the other person truly needs, someone to listen so they can air their feelings and find the answer within themselves that is right for that moment.

John Fox has written a lovely poem that expresses this precious gift.

When Someone Deeply Listens To You

When someone deeply listens to you
it is like holding out a dented cup
you've had since childhood
and watching it fill up with
cold, fresh water.

When it balances on top of the brim,
you are understood.

When it overflows and touches your skin,
you are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you
the room where you stay
starts a new life
and the place where you wrote

your first poem
begins to glow in your mind's eye.
It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you
your bare feet are on the earth
and a beloved land that seemed distant
is now at home within you.

This is the gift of being truly and deeply present to another.

The gift of being present to another goes far beyond this moment. There have been many studies of people who have grown up and found some degree of success in life, even having had extremely difficult childhood life experiences. In spite of poverty, abandonment, abuse, learning challenges, the studies reveal that most people have the capacity for resilience, the ability to bounce back and even thrive no matter what the seemingly impossible odds. What do these studies reveal about the common threads that seem to help them overcome these overwhelming risk factors? The number one mediating factor is - human contact.... human presence. At least one person along the way, in the midst of trying times, at least one person left the lasting impression through their words and actions that this struggling person was worthy of love and life and could find success. They pass on some of God's grace.... God's unconditional love as they let this boy or girl or young person know that there is precious value here! That he or she has sacred worth!

Rachel Naomi Remen in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom* shares a personal story which illustrates the power of presence that can help create resilience. When she was thirteen her family was experiencing very hard financial times.

That year was the year we all made presents. But among the presents on Christmas morning was a small velvet box. I knew that such a box was not likely to contain something handmade. My father smiled, "It's for you,

open it.” Inside were a pair of 24 karat gold earrings. They were exquisite. I stared at them in silence, bewildered, feeling the weight of my homeliness, my shyness, my hopeless differences from my classmates who easily joked and laughed. “Aren’t you going to try them on?” prompted my father, so I took them into the bathroom, closed the door, and put them on. My sallow, pimply face and lank hair looked much as always. The earrings looked absurd.

Tearing them from my ears I rushed back into the living room and flung them on the floor. “How could you do this? Why are you making fun of me? Take them back. I’m too ugly to wear them. How could you waste all this money?” My father said nothing until I had cried myself out. Then he handed me his clean, folded handkerchief and said gently, “I know they don’t look right now. I bought them because someday they will suit you perfectly.”

I am truly grateful to have survived my adolescence. At some of its lowest moments, I would get out the box and look at the earrings. My father had spent a hundred dollars he did not have because he believed in the person I was becoming.

Rachel’s father offered her Grace.... He let her know she had sacred worth. He was intimately present to her concerns and her pain. He gave her a gift that helped her to put down some deep roots into the fertile soil of love and acceptance and possibilities.

I am actually a very private person. I am most comfortable with my own council. But when I have been touched ever so briefly by the presence of someone who is truly listening and present with me, this is rare and golden and precious. The Quakers have a process called a clearness committee. Within an atmosphere of complete trust, a person who is seeking clarity on a decision or concern or question can convene a clearness committee. Then, held within the safety of a

circle of friends, they gain clarity. The role of those within the circle is to listen deeply as the focus person describes what is going on. The group members can ask open-ended questions. They do not give any suggestions. Near the end of this time, they can reflect back phrases the person said him or herself. They hold this safe space in the hope that the focus person's inner teacher or inner wisdom can emerge, sometimes within this circle, but more often some time later as the process percolates within. I have been blessed to be a participant in this kind of caring process. This was one of the times I have felt the presence of others most deeply. These people cared and supported me and listened and held me without any efforts to fix it or give me a solution. And in both cases, I discovered the wisdom within me that I needed to make my decision. Their loving, quiet listening support was an offering of their presence.

God's grace is all around. Love and compassion are there for each of us. How will we respond? May each of us thoughtfully use this Lenten time as an opportunity to set aside some of the busyness and demands of life to practice presence... being in the loving presence of God and offering this gift to others.