

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 *The king, David, ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom. So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword. Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him. Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the Lord has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you." The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man." The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"*

Our lessons today sent me in one direction. At their essence, they're all about Grace.

Grace – we say it – we name churches and children after it – Just what are we talking about – Grace?

Several weeks ago, when I read today's lessons, I wrote 3 words on my notes: "Read Yancy's Amazing."

I knew what I meant when I picked them up. Published 21 years ago, "What's So Amazing About Grace?" still has the market on Grace as we can understand it. It's a progression of understanding of the Amazing nature of Grace by author and Jesus-seeker, Philip Yancey. If you are looking for a book, get it. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it.

Yancey speaks of Grace in stories – saying that just words can not convey it fully. He describes Grace as 'our last best word' – and in his stories paints the magnitude – the joy – the gladness and rejoicing of the recipient of grace – For grace is pure giving of the recipient – infinite and asking nothing of the recipient.

Daring to summarize the stories in words, let's think of Grace as pure giving – love poured out in love – of God and like God – to us and so to one another.

Our readings today speak of grace – stories of God and God's people that we might recognize Grace as our life and our way.

Let's look at our reading from Samuel – and the story that surrounds it. We've talked about David as king – His love of God – and his very human wants and distractions. Sometimes, God's faithful servant – at others – so much a worldly king. Today we hear of the death of David's second son, Absalom.

Consolidating the background: there had been a terrible rift in David's family – Sin, retaliation, anger, the unquenched need for vengeance had set son against son against father. Yet in all, and in today's reading, we find that David remains a father in love, even with a son warring against him.

David has given strict instructions, that despite the war, son Absalom should not be harmed. And here we see that a father cannot always be a protector. Absalom is trapped in a freak accident – then slain by Joab who carries an old grudge against him. More retribution! Joab finally has his payback. And in losing another son, King David grieves all the more.

In his grief, David becomes a King. For David ends the cycle of payback. David, having lost so much, offers forgiveness to all involved in the fighting. Grace is given the angry and reckless. Grace is the

way of a real king. Grace given – allowing life to those who’ve done nothing to earn it – who in fact have worked to destroy. Grace is extended. Gratis! Free! A clean slate offered.

Grace is the way of God – It is the way of goodness – Forgiveness and giving. Even unearned. It’s unnatural! It’s downright scandalous! Yet without it, where is our direction? Where is hope?

Isn’t that what we are looking for in any conflict or confusion? Not more pain, but rather moving forward in life together – evenly – honestly – in kindness and care and respect. An absolute end to the pain and conflict that we might live. Acceptance in hope – that each might honor the other – Working to build the Kingdom of God. Expecting the best of each of us. Living our best and becoming all that God creates us to be. Because God gives – Everything we have is grace – costing us nothing.

And Jesus gave – Daring to speak God’s Kingdom into a world of takers – that they and we might become givers instead, Living in grace as vessels of Grace.

How do we do that? Here- in this church – in our work and other interactions outside these doors - - in our family life – and even in our own life with God. Are we people of grace?

Let’s start here. Today. In God’s Grace we are together. Living in grace, we come seeking God – seeking strength – seeking the recharge of grace. It’s a time focused on shared life and God’s giving.

And it should be, for life in grace –a taste of God’s grace – begins right here in every gathering.

It’s evident in our Communing – the sharing of the sustenance of the world: Bread. The sharing of the Life of the world: the cup – as commanded by Jesus and through which Jesus reminds us of grace. Jesus gave all – dying in order that we might see our way through death. Giving all of himself in order that we would receive. That we would be children of God, friends of Jesus, and promised life beyond what we can perceive. Bread of Heaven– Life flowing from God into us. A taste of life in God’s peace.

Forgiven – healed – renewed – to become vessels of grace – Forgiving, Healing, Renewing. Receiving - filling – and then pouring out the grace of God through US. *“...imitators of God... beloved children... (living) in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.”*

That’s what lets us go out into the world, fearlessly living and giving – God’s own children.

I realized in these weeks, again, how much of our ability to exude grace depends on our ability to first extend the love of God – accept the Grace of God – for ourselves. How much of our living in God’s image begins with us accepting ourselves as children of God – made by God – beloved of God. Grace accepted as each of us sees ourselves as God made us.

It’s pretty hard to love others when we’re not so sure about ourselves. It’s pretty hard to live in grace, accepting, forgiving, daring to open our hearts fearlessly – until we really accept that we are good enough – and God’s enough. Living in grace starts in the mirror.

Do you look like God? As you think of yourself – as you interact with others – in each day. Can you recognize God’s grace in you?

It’s not about power – it’s not about stuff – It’s about knowing that you are loveable and that you are loved. Period. It’s about knowing what we look like – the real story – not the fun-house mirror image.

Think about it. Pray about it. Where in your life do you see God’s grace? Notice! Marvel! Say thank you!

Where in your life are you denying – maybe repelling and acting against God’s grace? Search those places out – look behind them into the fears that most certainly drive them. And one by one, dare to let them go. This is part of our spiritual formation – that we examine our lives every day – rejoicing and reforming – that we might live as God’s own. Search yourself – And know with all your heart that under the prickles and the tarnish – you’re still God’s child.

I read another story last week – about a priest talking with some elementary school children. One of the kids suddenly blurted out, “*You’re blind!*” And yes, he was blind. He answered her kindly, saying, “*Yes. That is not news to me.*”

The child became sad – and then she continued. “*But you don’t know what you look like.*”

The little one’s statement caught him off guard – Yet before he could respond, she softly said, “*You’re beautiful.*”ⁱ

God says the same to each of us, “*You’re beautiful!*” Despite the smears and barbed wire we might think protect us. Despite the fear-fog as we look at ourselves. You – I – every one of us – is flooded by God’s grace in every good and bad and even thoughtless day. And God keeps pouring that grace – that giving and giving – in spite of us. It’s ready for us to receive – one breath – one sip – at a time.

It doesn’t take failure of our eyes to keep us from truly seeing ourselves. The beautiful – the places in need of work – and the belovedness of us remain In God’s grace that is unlimited love for each of us.

So where do we go from here, as we seek to accept and then be always more filled vessels of that grace? Let’s start each day with tenderness. Speak to yourself in each morning in of God’s love – and in each day, live the kindness that is love lived in truth. Take care of the child that is you.

Expect the good and live into the good. Ending all that takes you from the fullness of life– and step by step, become more like Jesus each day. Giving for the sake of giving – not for what you will get.

For God’s grace – pure giving – pours out in every day. Pouring into all we can see – and so much more than we can see.

Through and in God’s grace, live each day. Pay attention! And give thanks – for gratitude lets us recognize joy.

Let God’s grace flow through you – to be used in love – in peace – in security. Vulnerable yet safe in that never-ending stream that enlivens the goodness that is you. Living a life that shows God’s goodness to all of the world – each one you meet. It begins with accepting God’s grace for ourselves, becoming more God’s in the realization of God’s love for each of us.

Each day, look in your heart’s mirror – and remind the child that is you – “*You are beautiful.*”

Then go – and meet God’s world, “*Burning grace like jet fuel!*”ⁱⁱ

There’s no charge – no limit. Be filled – love – and live – giving all you’ve got. Just like God. **Amen.**

ⁱ Chris Heuertz.

ⁱⁱ Dallas Willard.