

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Grace and Peace

Revelation 1.4-8

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In the awful dark days of WWI, somewhere in Normandy, France, on the back of a card someone copied a prayer which began, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." It's a sweet prayer in good times; in war times, it's audacious and courageous. On the other side of the card was a picture of St. Francis of Assisi and so, as this prayer began to be passed from one weary person to the next, it became known as the peace prayer of St. Francis even though no one knows for sure where it originated. It may have been in the heart of that unknown person surviving the harrowing trials of the war raging all around them, a battle so big and awful, it seemed the whole world was at war. What war has ever not seemed that way to those in the midst of it?

It's often called the prayer of St. Francis because of the connection with the picture on the card and because the prayer so expresses the spirit of Francis and his friends. But it could also be called the disciple's prayer, all disciples of Jesus Christ, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."

Could this be all our prayer? Could your picture be on the other side of the card on which the prayer is written?

It should be and even more so. Almost every letter in the New Testament begins with the greeting of grace and peace. Almost every letter, whether from Paul, Peter, John, or unknown writers, begins with some form of the greeting, "grace and peace to you." Revelation began the same way: "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come."

This grace and peace greeting was not standard boilerplate in first century letter writing. Typically, a letter would begin with a simple word: "Greetings!" Christian letter writers, as we see in the New Testament letters to churches in Rome, Corinth, Philippi, and beyond, modified the greeting: "grace and peace to you."

Grace is always first. It's never peace and grace to you. I think this order is important. In the ideas of other ancient religions, a person had to make peace with the gods in order to receive anything good, so peace came first and then maybe grace. To make peace with the gods you might make sacrifices or make a pledge of some sort or find some other way to appease their anger. Farmers tried to appease the gods of rain and floods in order to assure a good crop. If things were going badly in a soldier's war or in a farmer's fields or a family's child birthing, it was common to think that the god of war or crops or babies was angry. And you better do whatever you can do to make peace with them so they won't be angry anymore and you might be given victory, harvest or babies or whatever else you desire. Go to that appropriate god's temple, make peace with the gods first, and then grace will come if you do it right.

Some people today think that's how it works with God. I need to get my life right and then if I do *just right*, God will bless me. I need to say the prayer in the right way or somehow appease God's anger to be worthy of God's love.

For Christians it was the exact reversal of the order. God's grace comes first, before anything else we do or intend or pray or promise to do. Grace is an unmerited gift that comes from somewhere beyond you. It's not yours to earn or claim. It's God's to give, and God is gracious. So, grace comes first from God. Peace is a gift to those who receive and who dwell within God's gracious heart. Peace is a gift and a calling. Peace to receive and peace to embody and to give. Jesus says blessed are the peacemakers.

It's not always easy to dwell in the state of grace or the presence of peace. There's so much within and without that threatens our reception of God's grace and a life of peace. Some people feel so awful about themselves, about their bodies or their actions or their decisions, that they cannot even believe that there is any grace for them, and they certainly can hardly offer it to anyone else. And yet, this greeting still begins most of the New Testament, even to people whose lives were pretty much a mess, and even the book of Revelation which was not written in a place of much grace or any peace as the world knows it.

Revelation was written by John from the rocky island of Patmos where he was in captivity as a political prisoner of the Roman empire. Patmos was like Roman Alcatraz. We're not sure exactly why he was imprisoned there, but if you read Revelation, you see quickly what John thought about the empire, which was probably what got him in trouble. In the letter he insults Rome as a Babylon and a dragon and a beast. Before being sent to Patmos, he was probably even more explicit. A Roman guard reading over this letter on its way out may not pick up on all the references, but the Christians reading it would have known what he meant. The empire is dangerous. It has evil ends. It will try to crush the people of God. It will be defeated.

Apparently, John was writing to Christians who were compromising with the ways of the empire. John was concerned that they were giving in, losing their distinctiveness, giving up on what it means to be a follower of Jesus in a dangerous world. They were forgetting who they are and who they are called to be. John is under no illusion, imprisoned as he was, that the world was a kind place or would be gentle with Christians. He knew what happened to Jesus. Of course, he knew, and he remembered. And he knew what happened to Christians who did not bend the knee to Caesar. Revelation is written to remind them who Christians are, who God is, and where our hope lies. And the whole thing begins with those two words: grace and peace.

Even in the midst of uncertainty.

Even in exile, in imprisonment, in the face of suffering and persecution

Even when you're lost and alone.

Christian witness was, and is, and shall be: God's grace and peace to you—whoever you are.

It's scary out there though. The world doesn't run on grace or peace. What are Christians to do? Hide? The first disciples huddled in a room and locked the doors out of fear and paranoia. It's

not hard to understand why. Their fear was justified. Let's imagine being in their shoes just days after the crucifixion of Jesus, the violent end of the man of grace and prince of peace. They had every reason to fear. Sometimes Christians even now are tempted to repeat the same thing. To get inside, lock the doors, and keep quiet. The world is a dangerous place, not just full of violent people but dangerous ideas. So, Christians find a room, get inside, and lock the doors behind them.

Soren Kierkegaard identified with this image and this gospel story. He wanted Jesus to do for him what Jesus did for them, to come through his locked doors, his resistance, and breathe peace inside him. Into such a locked room comes Jesus. He is not daunted by our resistance or our fear. The risen Christ invades closed spaces. No locked doors can keep Christ out. The grace of God is manifested in the resurrected Christ who comes even to those who have abandoned him in the darkest hour. He comes with words of life, and this is grace. He comes into the room and says, "Peace be with you." Three times in this story, Jesus says, "Peace be with you." Even in the most troubling times and most dangerous situations when all seems lost, God's peace remains. Peace be with you.

God's peace isn't just the luxury of comfortable communities in the world. It's not just religious language that Christians play marbles with in the safe confines of sanctuary. It is forged in the fires of testing and suffering or it is nothing at all.

Yet this is not all. As the Father sent me, so I send you. The disciples are to leave the saferoom and go back into the world, the very same world that killed Jesus. Christians are to go back into the world, even with all their fears and doubts and uncertainties, sent as ambassadors of grace and peace. The way is costly. The disciples knew that, and yet their witness lived on. A person in Normandy in 1915, still prays, "Make me an instrument of your peace." Not just a recipient, but an instrument.

You know the prayer:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Christians have lived this kind prayer, even in the darkest of circumstances.

In 1934, a group of German Christians in the Barmen Declaration repudiated German Christian Nationalism and its support of the Nazis. Their commitment to grace and peace cost some of them their lives.

In 1985, more than 150 clergy from 20 denominations drafted the Kairos Document to protest South African apartheid. It disavowed “state theology” that blessed the racial and economic injustice that cut to the heart of human dignity.

In 2003, in Baltimore, a group of nuns who were members of the Jonah House community were sentenced to federal prison for protesting nuclear weapons. They had broken into a nuclear facility and smeared a cross using their own blood on Minuteman silos.

In Ukraine, there are a group of Christians, inheritors of protestant historic peace churches like the Mennonites and the Baptists, trying to be faithful to Jesus even when under withering attack. None of them are hiding in a locked room. Some have taken up arms to defend the nation. They don't want to wage war but feel they must defend what is under attack in any way possible. Others have sought other ways. A majority of evangelical Christians are contributing through humanitarian help rather than armed combat. How to live grace and peace of Jesus become utterly serious life and death questions when you're in the heart of the world's darkness and the enemy is at the gate. A pastor near the frontlines said, “Soon we will become a society full of angry, traumatized people,” He then said. “As salt and light in the community, we have to help them forgive their enemies.” What is more courageous than that?

The head of the Mennonite mission agency in Ukraine recognized the searing difficulty living grace and peace, and living as salt and light in the world. He said, “The church must preach nonviolence before war, and reconciliation after. But once begun, it would be naïve to call for disarmament in the face of genocide.” He said then, “Armed conflict represents the failure of the global church, and calls all believers to repentance for their share in failing to prevent it.”

Maybe he's exactly right. All believers are called to repentance for the failure of the church of grace and peace to prevent war wherever it is, especially that among professing Christians. If we are to be people of grace or peace, that seems like the right place to begin. This place in our hearts, too, is a locked room into which Jesus comes and breathes upon us the grace of the grief of our failures.

Revelation says from the beginning that God made us to be priests serving the one to whom glory and dominion belong forever and ever. We may not yet believe we are saints, but we are made priests.

Priests take the ordinary and broken things of the world and hold them up to the light, up to God in faith. In their hands, priests take our prayers and confessions and sins and break them and themselves open before God and then return to the world the signs of brokenness as signs of restoration. In their prayers and in their hands and in the faith of the broken body of Jesus

Christ, they take all things and lift it to the God in whom there is the hope of grace and the hope of peace and new creation.

They can take war and lift it to God, and they take hunger and lift it to the Divine One. And lift hatred and violence and persecution and idolatry and cynicism and judgment and border walls and broken bodies and warped ecologies and unjust economies and hold them in their scarred hands up to God, and then return them to the world transformed with hope in God's grace and hope of the reign of the Prince of Peace.

You are sent into the world as it is, in need of grace. You are sent as a people with God's peace within you. You are sent for such a purpose. For this is still Easter. And it will be for a long time. So, through you, as John prophesied, every eye will see Christ, even those who pierce him, and they will mourn over him.

Grace is in the tears we weep for ourselves and for the world. May those tears will water the seeds of the new creation; those who are instruments of God's peace, in the rocky ground of darkness sow light and in the soil of despair sow hope. For we know that it is in dying that we are born to eternal life because it's Easter. And He is risen.

Amen

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