

For we are what he has made us...

If someone were to ask, how would you answer the question, "What are you?" Might your response be, "I'm a wife/husband/partner; a third-grade teacher; a plumber; a grocery store cashier; a student; a child; retired and a grandparent...the list can be pretty significantly endless.

Did anyone consider your answer to be, I'm a minister, I'm a believer, I'm a Jesus Follower? A beloved child of the Creator? A likeness, an Image of God? It doesn't seem unusual that most of us wouldn't have jumped in with these responses or that hearing those words from another are pretty against the odds. Is the word minister, in the minds of many, set apart and reserved only for ordained persons?

Let me pause for just a moment to give time to take in the options: minister, believer, Jesus Follower, Beloved Child of the Creator, likeness/image of God.

I have a friend of long standing, from high school, and I will always remember the night, decades ago, when a small group of friends got together for pizza and beer, and "Anne" who had come back from AZ to Middleport for a family event, shared with our intimate group of friends/classmates, that she is a lesbian. I'm not sure any of us was surprised by her "confession", but I am sure that each of us loved/loves Anne and appreciates her as the child of God she is, receiving her honesty without judgement, condemnation, or severing of relationship. Sadly, that was left to some of her family members and was one of the reasons she left the area. Clearly, I recall Anne saying, "God didn't make junk." Despite having been chastised by those in her local faith community, several family members, and decades ago, a large group who had little understanding or desire to be accepting of and inviting toward all of God's children, Anne maintained her faith and understood the meaning of the word Grace as an inclusive term, an invitation and gift that is offered to ALL. God didn't make junk. Doesn't make junk...

Grace was offered to the Israelites, too. A leader, manna, water, a way, a relationship...yet whining, petulance, dissatisfaction, self-pity, impatience seemed to be the constant mantra of "the chosen". Imagine how we feel or felt while on a road trip with toddlers. Little feet kicking our seats, refereeing squabbles between siblings, digging through the snack bag just in case something struck the fancy of the whiner, and the drone of the words, "Are we there yet?" God had(and maybe still does?) a whole "tribe of toddlers" to deal with. Finally, in exasperation, God sends snakes to get the attention of the thankless fearful band of desert wanderers. After council with God, Moses fashions a bronze serpent and lifts it for the Israelites to gaze at and with that look upon, if bitten, the venom doesn't harm them. With their attention refocused and relationship being restored, they can move forward.

Might we take a minute to think about this: There are those among us, perhaps we ourselves if we honestly assess, who allow the deadly venom of fear or ingratitude to dictate our lives, our thoughts. Fear of the unknown, fear of others different from us, fear of the future, fear of failure, fear of scarcity, fear of death itself, can cut us off from receiving grace and mercy as we suffer spiritual and emotional paralysis. Sadly, fear can take us as far as hatred and hardness of heart and soul and cause a death if its own in a way. It seems to me that those who spurned Anne, seeing only how she differed from them, accepted hardness of heart rather than the gift

of grace that would have allowed a new, accepting, inclusive appreciation for the gifts and talents, and simple presence, my friend had to offer.

Does our current lifestyle, social media, social status, TV, lack of humility, cause us to be blind to the myriad gifts, blessings, and graces we're given and rather than being grateful and expressing gratitude, we long for more, bigger, better? Might we be apt to allow our wants to draw us away from what really matters? To take more than our share, to ignore the basic needs of our neighbors, to pretend that our transgressions and those of others aren't hurting society and our planet?

Ponder on John 3:16 so familiar. "For God so loved THE WORLD...so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life (I suppose a different way of saying 'be saved'). The WORLD: not me, not you, not those like us, not Episcopalians, and those with the same religious beliefs, not democrats, not republicans, not the privileged white, not just human beings but THE WORLD! The myriad existence of all that is created, given essence by love, and throughout the beginning chapters of Genesis, declared good, Very good!

Announcing that he or she is saved, for me, doesn't have the same sound or feel as living as a believer. Believing in Jesus, who personifies Love in our world, may then mean we have to genuinely care for, not judge, condemn or try to change, other races and creeds. If the world is more than just the human race, then perhaps belief also means we should be insisting on caring about creation with its precarious eco-systems and its millions of interacting lifeforms.

Remember, Jesus was a bit radical in his expression of love, acceptance, collegiality. If one claims to believe, then crossing boundaries and walking on the other side of life seems a requirement, regardless of how fearsome it might be. Gazing at He who was "lifted up" so that venom and fear can be put in their place, may bring us to our knees in gratitude for the grace that is a perpetual balm poured over and into us.

Might accepting grace move us into being "occupied" not preoccupied by the life work into which each of us has been called? Not separate from but in conjunction with-a lifestyle.

We are what he made us. God didn't make junk. Do you believe that you are created in his image and likeness? After a bit of thought, for me Image emphasizes the inward and spiritual attributes while likeness is the outward living of those attributes. As one grows in relationship with the Trinity, nurtures, and comes to more fully understand the "workmanship" (we are what he has made us) good works perhaps occur more naturally, not done as favors, penance, or out of fear but as an offering to God; by Jesus' example, enacting "that which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

Grace just is.

In closing I'll read these words from Frederick Buechner:

After handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shopworn nobody's much interested any more. Not so with grace, for some reason. Mysteriously, even derivatives like gracious and graceful still have some of the bloom left.

Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about anymore than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever *tried* to love somebody?

A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is that people are saved by grace. There is nothing *you* have to do. There is nothing you *have* to do. There is nothing you have to *do*.

The grace of God means something like: "Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are* because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you."

There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.

Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.

Amen

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