

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Grace ... Living Gift

Welcome and Introductions

Leader: Warmly welcome participants. Share with the group any ways the previous session has transformed your actions during the week. Invite participants (in a sentence or two) to share their experiences of transformation and God's grace in daily life.

Opening Prayer

Leader: Lent is about becoming more aware of God's love.
Where do we experience the *gift* of God in our lives?

1st Person: We see the gift of God in the faces of the children in our lives ...

PAUSE

2nd Person: We find the gift of God in the smile of a loved one or friend ...

PAUSE

3rd Person: We know the gift of God in our own ability to trust when things seem hopeless ...

PAUSE

4th Person: We experience the gift of God in the beauty of nature ...

PAUSE

Other group members may wish to add a particular aspect of their own life in which they are experiencing the GIFT of God during this fourth week of Lent. When all who wish to speak have spoken, the leader continues:

Leader: In this fourth week of Lent, we rejoice in the gifts that God continually showers on us – the presence of GRACE in our lives ...

A longer PAUSE ... (at least 20 seconds in length)

Leader: Let us pray for hearts ready to receive the abundance that God is offering ...

All: Gracious God, giver of all good gifts,
your generous love is written in every facet of our days.
The immeasurable riches of your mercy
flow like a river of love through our lives.

Awaken the eyes and ears of our hearts,
that we may recognise and rejoice in the sound of your grace
in our own lives and in the lives of those we meet.

We ask this prayer, most gracious one,
through Jesus, your Son – your greatest gift to us –
and in the abundant Spirit – the joy of our hearts –
you, who are one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Scripture Reading

Before listening to or reading the texts below ask God for guidance and inspiration. Open your heart and mind to new insights and challenges for you this Lent. Listen to the words and phrases in your heart ... savour them ... notice if a word or phrase moves you or evokes a response within you. Write this word or phrase in the space provided after the reading.

A reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians (2:4-10 Jerusalem Bible)

God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy: when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ – it is through grace that you have been saved – and raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven, in Christ Jesus.

This was to show for all ages to come, through his goodness towards us in Christ Jesus, how infinitely rich he is in grace. Because it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by anything of your own, but by a gift from God; not by anything that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit. We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it.

After a period of silence the leader invites participants to share their word or phrase. This period is not intended as a lengthy discussion. Participants may add a brief explanation for their choice.

Scripture Reflection

It is a lifelong challenge for everyone to understand and believe Paul's description of us in today's second reading as 'God's work of art.' Nonetheless, it is absolutely true. If we look at a work of art, we always see something of the artist in it. We always leave part of ourselves in what we create and that is fundamentally true about God too. In Leonardo Da Vinci's words, the painter always paints himself.

Such is the richness of 'grace' in our lives that Paul mentions it three times in this excerpt from his letter to the Ephesians today. What is it? Prior to Vatican II many thought of it as an injection of some mysterious divine substance each time we received the Sacraments. The sacraments were like a spiritual syringe. Following the Council, the Church enabled us to see grace as the quality of our relationship with God emerging in the world around us. Quite simply, we came to view grace as God's love at work in our ordinary day to day world. We came to understand that God's grace had always been present in people's lives a long time ahead of preaching and teaching. Indeed, far from bringing grace to people, we now acknowledge it as our task to help awaken them to the reality of grace already present within them.

At the very end of George Bernanos' classic French novel *Diary of a Country Priest*, which depicts the corruption and excesses of the Church of the day, the good and honest young curate is dying of painful stomach cancer. His friend, who is with him, has sent for the priest to administer the last rites and they are waiting for him to arrive. The friend writes:

The priest was still on his way, and finally I was bound to voice my deep regret that such a delay threatened to deprive my comrade of the final consolation of the church ... He then uttered these words ... And I am quite sure that I have recorded them accurately, for his voice, though halting, was strangely distinct:

'Does it matter? Grace is everywhere ...'

In everyday conversation we tend to talk about graceful people, graceful moments, and graceful places. Ronald Rolheiser has identified tender moments in our lives as moments of grace and reminds us in *Forgotten Among the Lilies* that 'we need to pray by picking up the tender moment and letting its grace soften us. What constitutes the tender moment? Anything in life that helps make us aware of our deep connectedness with each other, of our common struggle, our common wound, our common sin, and our common need for help ...'

Lutherans often talk about the notion of 'a grace place', not unlike what the Irish describe as 'a thin place', where the visible and invisible, the spiritual and material worlds, are seamlessly interwoven. Is there 'a grace place', 'a thin place' for you?

Grace is everywhere. All is gift. If we take J.B. Metz's definition of God as 'interruption', then God's grace will be present in all the surprising circumstances of our lives. These are moments of grace. It might be a chance encounter with someone we have not met for a time, an unexpected compliment or phone call, a harrowing disappointment, even a blessing by a total stranger. They can be both welcome and frustratingly intrusive.

Can we be channels of grace this Lenten season? Indeed, we might seek out someone to whom we need to offer forgiveness. In forgiving another, we are gracing both ourselves and the person we forgive. We might reflect also on our own graced story and recall the many blessings and favours which God has bestowed on us. What features stand out for you as 'God's work of art'. Is it too much to ask, as Tony de Mello once wrote, that we be grateful for our sins as 'carriers of grace'? Whatever our response, we need to keep an eye out for grace weaving its way through all the moments of our daily life.

- Take a few minutes to reflect quietly on the reading. When you are ready write down your responses, thoughts and ideas.
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Discussion and Sharing

Reflect on the questions below. Choose one or two questions to respond to.

- Share what you are comfortable with from your written responses to the scripture reflection.
- What difference does it make in your life to see the world as grace-filled? Share with the group your experiences of a grace-filled world.
- Looking back, can you see a thread of grace in your life ... what have been its colours?
- What needs to be released in us in order for 'God's work of art' to be revealed?
- What do you think is meant by the image of our sins as 'carriers of grace'?

Food for the Soul

Using the forward button set the CD to read 'track #' on the display. When you are ready to begin press play on the CD player.

Closing Prayer

Leader: Let us deepen the quiet in our minds and hearts by singing the mantra ...

All: *Into Silence, into Silence,
In the Quiet, find the Way!*

*Into Stillness, into Stillness,
Resting heart and mind and soul!*

*Grace that saved us, Gift that made us,
Raise us up with Christ the Lord!*

(Instrumental verse)

*Into Silence, into Stillness,
Leading deeply into Peace.*

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Leader: Let us pray in the spirit of Psalm 136 ...

All: God of our history, ground of all being,
you sing deep within us the song of your love.
Your blessing, abundant in earth, sea and sky,
echoes your care in remembering hearts.

O let our tongues fall silent if we ever forget,
if we ever forget you, most gracious one,
who has blessed us through Jesus, your Son and our Lord,
in the Spirit, the joy of our hearts,
you, who are one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Leader: In the letter to the Ephesians, St Paul reminds us that we are 'God's work of art'.
We know that our bodies are an amazing miracle of life!

In a spirit of sacred trust and openness, (and in silence), I invite you to allow the
person beside you to examine your hands in whatever way is comfortable for
you both ...

When you are ready, receive what that person tells you of the beauty s/he has
seen in your hands ...

Then, return this 'gift' for your partner's hands.

The leader allows plenty of time for this process ... and then, continues:

Leader: We have just been awakened to the reality of grace within us, through a sharing of the beauty that we carry in our bodies.

Let us praise the Holy Trinity for the outpouring of grace that we have received today and in every moment of our lives: Glory be to the Father ...

All: ... and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Leader: Before we go forth from here, graced and generous, and let us share the graciousness of God in a Sign of Peace ...

Word in Action

How can I be a living gift of grace for myself and others?

- What do you accept about yourself as God's work of art? What do others tell you? Affirm God's work of art in others this week. Write it on a piece of paper/card and give it to your husband, wife, children, mother, father, brother, sister, grandma, grandpa, or friend.
- Look for opportunities to be still within yourself and ponder aspects of your life that you feel are graced by God.
- Find an opportunity to be just present to another and to be a gift of grace that person.