

parables, healing people, and eventually dying on a cross. But God chose this slow, inefficient way that gave you and me room to ponder, to make plenty of mistakes, and to draw closer to holiness in our own way. Jesus' disciples still had room to make their mistakes—think of Peter denying Jesus three times. And then they had space to realize them, repenting and serving as preachers and teachers after Jesus' resurrection. All of that goes to show that offering grace to others by giving them room to be will not always result in a quick solution to our storms. Jesus endured the worst the world had to offer. Yet his resurrection reminds us that God's slow, grace-filled ways still result in beauty, joy, and new life. In our lives, offering grace may not still our storms right away, but it usually results in better relationships, stronger discipleship, and deeper love.

Bilbro writes about how the slow, grace-filled actions we take today are spiritually meaningful. He says, "There is no economic justification for my boiling the sap from the maple trees in my backyard, playing dolls with my daughter, or listening to my first-year students read their essays and engaging with them about their writing. These things are slow, inefficient,—and in some ways—difficult. But they constitute relationships of attention and care between me and those I'm called to love. If I choose ease instead, I forgo the opportunity to have the God who is love abide in me."³

When we leave room for activities that value others and what brings them joy, instead of doing only what's efficient or 'necessary,' then we build up trust and connection between us. As we've said this summer, human connections are always valuable in navigating rough patches. When we leave space between us, there is room for new possibilities to take shape. And it's also possible that when we practice grace by creating spaciousness among us, God will be the one to come and occupy that bit of space. God will come to abide in us and between us and all around us. There will be room for the Holy Spirit in our lives. She won't be squeezed out in our crush to have our way or get everything done.

Stewarding the grace God gives us means being incredibly grateful for that gift in our own lives. And it also means holding the grace lightly; being willing to release that grace to others in the form of spaciousness between us, holding our tongues, or investing in time together, all the while trusting that interactions we assume are inefficient or useless are often the ones when God is most present.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Krista Tippet, qtd in interview with Mike Copser, "Guest Appearances," *Christianity Today*, Jan/Feb 2025, p.25.

2 Jeffrey Bilbro, "AI and All Its Splendor," *Christianity Today*, Jan/Feb 2025, p.62.

3 Bilbro, 62.

August 17, 2025

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

"Practicing Grace—Making Room to Make it Through"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Exodus 33:12-23 and 1 Peter 4:8-11

My family uses the public library a lot. Always has. As I have thought about how offering grace to others can be a spiritual practice for making our way through stormy times. I realized that my earliest understanding of *grace* might not have been in church, but actually at the library. I learned about the library's grace period as a kid. When we were late returning books, my mom would remind me that we had "7 days' grace." We were given those extra days after the due date before the library started charging us a fine. My understanding of that grace period was that it came as a gift. We had already used up our actual loan period for the books, but the library gave us a little leeway. They understood we sometimes needed a few extra days because we weren't perfect and they were accommodating of that. The grace period was a helpful kindness.

We know that God's grace is given to us in many and various ways. We never deserve that incredible love. We cannot count the amount of forgiveness given to us. We are continually astounded at God's steadfast and patient presence. All those aspects of God's grace are given joyfully and freely to us. Peter calls *us* to be *stewards* of the manifold grace of God. Which means that we, as recipients, are not the endpoint of God's grace. We are called to *do something* with God's grace. Or maybe better said, we are to *share and offer* that grace to others, in addition to enjoying it ourselves. As stewards, we can think of God's grace as a resource that we choose wisely how to use. Grace is a renewable resource, thanks be to God! But just like with wind, water, and sunlight, we still have to be smart about the way we interact with it. We cannot take grace for granted and we are called to share it appropriately, never to hoard it for ourselves.

The library's use of a grace period helps us understand what it means to be a steward of grace; what it looks like to make offering grace a spiritual practice. Offering grace to other people means *giving* a little; not demanding quite so much. Pastor Carol Holbrook-Prickett puts it this way, "The spiritual practice of grace, is, to my mind, a lot like the practice of

leaving space between vehicles. It means giving people a little space to mess up, to be distracted, to be unpredictable, to be inconvenient, without crashing into them. It means stepping back a little, not trying to control others or react to every little thing they do. It means leaving a little bit of room between you and someone else, so that their imperfections—and yours—don't damage you both."

Offering grace to others asks us to slow down, to act with intention, not to react so quickly, and maybe just to tone ourselves down when our expectations are really high. For some people, these things come naturally, and what a blessing for them and those around them! Others of us operate with tight margins and a goal of efficiency; we like control and when we lose it, we react. Sometimes we do crash into other people with our big feelings and high expectations. If you're someone like that, then I can certainly relate. But that's also what makes offering grace a wonderful spiritual practice. It is something we can focus on and get better at. It's a way of being we can intentionally work on. Doing so might help the stormy waters around us even out sometimes. And though it might result in self-improvement or better relationships, *offering* grace to others can also help us *receive* God's grace with more awareness and gratitude.

But how do we do it? The journal *Christianity Today* this year shared an interview with Krista Tippet, host of the radio show "On Being." Tippet said, "love is very often what we do in spite of how we feel at this very moment...The way love works...is very often about what we choose *not* to say right now. We choose not to say things right now because we choose to stay in relationship."¹ I found her words really surprising. I usually imagine loving acts to be things we do and say; things we add, not things we take away. And yet her words also rang true for me. Choosing to *not* say the angry words that have bubbled up inside us; choosing to keep to ourselves the critical comment about our kid's outfit or our spouse's performance of chores; or the coworker who isn't doing things the way we want: those things do feel like acts of love. Those are practical ways to offer grace. Keeping those words to ourselves leaves a little space between us. Not saying some things lets other people be themselves. It acknowledges that we are not in total control of things, much as we might like to be. And it often prevents or calms a potential conflict. Giving that space, maintaining silence sometimes, allows other people to be who God made them to be. Which is also a reminder that very often, we are invited to give ourselves a little more grace, too. We can stop repeating to ourselves those negative scripts in our heads about what we're not good at or what we messed up. We can give ourselves a little more time to accomplish what some probably unrealistic standard implies we ought to be doing right now. Often that

is a way to begin calming the storms we feel inside. There's room to *offer* grace to ourselves and to others as part of our spiritual practice.

God models a way for us to give grace to others. In Exodus, the people were coming out of the golden calf incident, where they had worshipped an idol instead of God. Moses entered into a back and forth discussion with God about the ramifications of that sin. Would God still go with the people into the promised land? Moses urged God to do so, even if God's presence would be different now. God relented and promised to continue on the journey with Moses and the people. But Moses wanted a clear sign so he could be confident about God's accompaniment. He asked to see God's glory. Which is quite a request! The fullness of God's glory is enormous, potentially overwhelming to a human. Instead of awesome glory, God said, "I will show you all my goodness." God told Moses that no one could see the full glory of God and live. So, the presence of God passed before Moses, but God's own hand covered Moses' eyes to protect him, until only the back side of God was visible.

God graciously offered Moses what he needed: a visible sign of God's presence and trustworthiness. But God did it in a way that honored Moses' human limitations. God did not overwhelm him. God held back a little; gave him some space and protected him. The gift honored Moses' limits and God's own boundaries. Just the way *not* saying everything we're thinking can be an act of love, God's willingness not to show the full divine glory to Moses was a way of protecting him while still reaching out to him with care.

Offering grace to others does not usually seem to be the most appealing or expedient way of getting out of a storm. I suspect Moses really wanted what he wanted—to view the fullness of God, even if that wasn't what was best for anyone. Similarly, in the middle of a storm in our home or personal life, we are more likely to tighten our grip, to demand more from others or expect them to do things our way. Whether these strategies are successful or not. So it seems counter intuitive to loosen our grip, to give people more space to potentially mess up or do something differently. But when we practice grace, that is exactly what we are called to do. God didn't go all in on showing God's own self to Moses, but graciously offered a small glimpse that was enough to demonstrate God's trustworthiness.

This was how Jesus operated, too, even in the midst of a stormy and broken world that, eventually, was trying to kill him. As Professor Jeffrey Bilbro writes, "Jesus also did good things inefficiently."² All of Jesus' ministry graciously left room for other people to think, to decide, to wonder. God could have transformed the world some other way than through a Palestinian Jew, trudging around the countryside, speaking in