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Grace Doesn't Make Sense

By The Rev. Rachel Rickenbaker

On one of the morning news shows the other day, I watched as one reporter surprised his co-hosts with some gift baskets. One of the co-hosts responded, "Oh, this is so kind. But I didn't get you anything." To which the reporter chuckled and said, "That's not what giving is about."

I share this example because it is an example of what we Christians call "grace." In our Book of Common Prayer, grace is defined in the Catechism as "God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills (p. 858)."

We may know this definition of "grace," at least intellectually, but we so often struggle to live it out. When it comes to our relationship with God, we know that grace is a gift from God, and yet, we continue to try somehow to earn it. We strive to do better and be better and attain some level of perfection that we think we must achieve, in order to please God.

We say things like, “If I just pray more or help my neighbor more, then my life will be easier or happier.” We run ourselves ragged in the rat race of life, always seeking to climb an imaginary ladder to God, as if our own actions will bring us closer to God. All the while, our Lord is reaching out to us with grace, and by his work, draws us closer into his loving arms.

When it comes to our relationship with our neighbors, we struggle to respond with grace. Many times, we have no idea what others are going through, but we expect much out of them – the cashier, the driver sharing the highway with us, the fast-food worker, the customer service rep. on the phone at the call center, not to mention our spouses and loved ones.

It is hard to respond to people in our daily lives with grace because so often we are not given grace. But grace is not always going to be reciprocated. Grace is grace because it is often undeserved.

When it comes to how we treat ourselves, we also rarely respond with grace. I know this well in my own life. It is much easier to beat myself up and to say, “I should have...” or “I could have...” or “I can’t believe I didn’t do this or that.” All the while, I have to remember that God’s grace gifted to me means that even when I mess up, God is there, continuing to work in my life, offering forgiveness and respite, stirring my heart, and giving me strength.

The point is that yes, we fall short, and yes, we mess up in our relationship with God, with our neighbors, and even with ourselves. But grace is a gift for those who don’t deserve it.

Grace doesn’t make sense. As my husband James often has to remind me, “A gift is not a gift if it must be reciprocated.” This is a good reminder because it’s so easy to feel guilty about not always returning the favor or having something to offer back when someone offers something I didn’t earn.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us (5:8).”

Not while we were perfect, or while we were good and righteous people, no. But while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. When we realize we don’t have enough to offer God, that our work will never measure up to all that

he's given and done for us, that's where there is fertile ground. That's where Jesus enters in to remind us of the good news that his grace is for us all, the undeserving.

We can turn to Jesus in our exhaustion and striving, and merely open our hands to the grace he offers. It may not always make sense, but that's exactly why it's a gift.