

The Weight of Grace

February 6, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Luke 5: 1-11

May the words of my mouth and meditations on all hearts be always acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer! Amen!

Speaking of rocks, if you've been to my office here at the church, you may have noticed a large, very heavy granite stone that sits on the floor by the comfy chairs in the corner. Etched onto that rock is the word "Grace!" I've brought it in today, and I'm going to lift it into onto the table, so you can see and maybe hear what I mean by heavy! ...

It's always struck me as an odd thing: to feel or imagine the weight of grace. Usually when I think about grace, I'm drawn to a sense, a gift even, of lightness, of un-burdening, even an effortless kind of floating that can arise in us when we open hearts to receive God's grace! Yet this rock has given me a different image, one that is equally compelling for me at least. It was a gift of a dear artist friend of mine. He used it, and about 50 or so other similarly etched stones with different words, as part of a public art installation years ago. He wasn't trying to make a theological point about the weight of this or any of the other words! And yet the more I've lived with this stone, the more of a gift its weight has been.

I've had it for years, but I've only recently begun noticing it during pastoral conversations. On just a few occasions so far, I've actually found myself prompted to ask someone if they might be willing to hold it in their lap, or once over Zoom to imagine doing so. I pick it up and gently place it, and let it sit there for a moment of shared silence, letting its gravity bear down. Like a heavy-weighted blanket, grace can sometimes have a steadying, grounding and rock-solid feel to it, if only we can let ourselves sit with it and believe it! Wondering how we might hold it in our bodies, that power of God's relentless love or abiding forgiveness of yourself or another, may become less an idea and more a thing of substance and even beauty! And here's the kicker, with God, we never carry it or lift it alone!

Forgive me for diving into such deep water so quickly but today I'm gonna blame that on our passage. Jesus says as much to his followers. Once he's in their boat, done teaching the crowds on the shore, he notices they haven't caught any fish and he says push out into deeper water. We can see Peter's eyeroll from here! "Man, we've been at it all night already! We're tired! Really?" But they follow his lead, and out they go, down their nets drop and next thing you know, they've got a huge catch! And next comes a line that I've never quite noticed before when reading this passage! "And they...filled both boats so that they began to sink!" Talk about a weight! Other translations for the Greek word Luke uses here are "swamp" or "plunge," as if into ruin! It never occurred to me before that the weight of that catch may at first have seemed downright scary, overwhelming, like it was too much to them to handle and haul in! Cue that classic line from Jaws when Brody first gets a look at that fish: "You're gonna need a bigger boat!"

Suddenly, there is a new-found sense of gravity, if not of urgency and direction about their mission! Yet rather than jump for joy, the weight of it all, that powerful sense of fear and awe that follows an

encounter with something more powerful than you, it drops Peter to his knees and he says something kinda strange: “Go away from me, Lord, for am I sinful man!” He’s just hit the jackpot and yet it was like it was all too much for him! Was he too tired? Did he think he didn’t deserve it or couldn’t handle it all? Whatever the case, we meet Peter here, right at a moment of profound recognition of that sinking gravity of God’s abundance that is about to plunge him into a whole new life! And rather than being thrilled, he’s humbled, amazed, overwhelmed and scared for why else would Jesus’s next line be “Don’t be afraid!” I wish Jesus added here: I’m right here in the boat with you! Grace can be heavy thing to hold at first! But we’ve got it! We’ve got it together!

I wonder if we know this sinking feeling. Not the gut punch of bad news but the sometimes unbelievable encounter with good news, or with moments of grave privilege or responsibility! News of a second chance, of a new birth, of some newfound and life-changing love, or even news that comes along with some pain or loss but that somehow allows to see the world more brightly and more gratefully than ever before? It may be so dizzying, so heavy, so overwhelming that we may not always trust it at first or see God’s grace shining through it! Think about where we all are now. After two years of pandemic promises that the peaks may finally be passing us, how ready are we to trust and believe and hear good news when it’s offered us? How ready are we trust that things can get better from here? Or to imagine a second chance at living our lives in new and different ways given what we’ve learned? By some standards, we’ve been getting boatloads of good news already with the omicron surge in retreat! It’s humbling, really, to think after living in so much fear for so long, after working all night to protect ourselves and our families, that we may have to be fearless again or at least that we may have to live fearlessly, in brand new ways! Are we ready to let that gravity and weight of God’s grace sink in, and not push it away, but instead to hold it, let it anchor us, and ground us for what comes next?!

I love getting to work with Issa on a service like today! I love this man, like family! On Monday, we were over for dinner and a drink with Nancy and me, mostly just catching up. But then we started talking about this passage and what lit up for us both. I told him what I’ve shared with you so far. He locked right in and suggested an old gospel tune, with an old gospel theology, called Love Lifted Me!

I was sinking deep in sin
 Far from the peaceful shore
 Very deeply stained within
 Sinking to rise no more
 But the master of the sea
 Heard my despairing cry,
 From the waters lifted me
 Now safe am I
 Love lifted me! Love lifted me!

Perfect, I thought! Until I heard the tune, which was a waltz, a little sing songy. And then I heard the other song that came to Issa’s mind because of what lit up about this passage for him! Verse 5. Remember? After Peter’s muted protest about working all night, he says, but “and yet if you say so,” I’ll drop the nets again! “Because Jesus says so! That’s why Peter does it! Issa got it immediately, that the passage is ultimately about trust and obedience! It’s about trusting that good news is coming, even it’s hard to believe, even if it’s a heavy weight to carry when it comes! It’s about trusting God when we are on our knees, humbled, overwhelmed, weighted down if only by the tremendous abundance of blessing that we can’t even see or recognize though it is sinking our ships!

You see Peter trusted! He obeyed! He followed! Despite his weariness and wariness. Despite his thinking he didn't have it in him to take another chance with those still empty nets! He chose not to listen to CNN, or Fox, what the experts or scholars were saying. He didn't even listen to his own gut telling him "we've tried it already?!" Instead, he listened to Jesus. He decided to follow Jesus! Spoiler alert: that's the anthem we are about to here! And look where it led him!

Siblings, family, as we turn this next pandemic corner, I wonder if we too can let ourselves imagine if not feel the weight of God's grace bearing down on us, grounding us, steadying us, anchoring us for what comes next. Two years into this pandemic and all that we've learned, there's no turning back to normal or wishing things were different. Instead we are called to trust and follow and be open to the blessing and brightness and weight of glory and grace that God has for us each and every day, even if in the end it means leaving everything behind. Did you catch that by the way? After that huge haul, Peter didn't even cash in! He left it behind! He had the sure thing in hand, and still he listened and trusted Jesus to lead him deeper still to find ever greater rewards from ever greater risks he would take in following. Forget about a full boat or plate of fish for him and his family, he would soon be tasting that bread of heaven, broken and blessed by Jesus himself. Once it all sank in, he let love lift him and carry him and all of his fears and regrets and humanity.

I pray that we too may be so ready to trust and live fearlessly and to be not afraid about whatever comes next. I pray that we too remember he's right here, in the same boat with us, and with all of humanity! He says it himself Be not afraid! Push into deeper waters still! Let God's abundant grace sink in! Come and follow! Why? *Because he said so!* May we all so decide to follow his fearless love, one step at a time, no turning back!

