

**Pastoral Letter to our Grace Church Family
From Pastors David and Carolyn Williamson
June 13, 2020**

This Sunday we are continuing our look at the life of Peter, one of Jesus' first disciples. Our hope is that as we look at God's involvement in Peter's life through Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit we may experience God's abundant, liberating, healing and saving involvement in our own lives.

One way to describe God's involvement in our lives and in our world is with the word "grace."

As John's gospel proclaims the good news that God hasn't abandoned the world, hasn't remained silent or stayed at a distance from the deep pain and hard-heartedness (darkness) of the world, he says these words:

"The Word [Jesus] became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, *full of grace* and truth. . . . From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." John 1:14, 16 (MSG and NRSV)

Jesus, the embodiment of grace, gets involved in, gets close to, gets broken by people's pain and hard-heartedness (darkness). This is what we see happening as we see Jesus getting involved in Peter's life.

Jesus gets into Peter's boat (Luke 5:3) - that boat being a symbol of the oppressive system of the fishing industry where Peter lived and worked. To learn more about the way the fishing industry in Jesus time was controlled by the Roman government through oppressive taxes and policies, [click here](https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/places/related-articles/fishing-economy-in-the-sea-of-galilee).

<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/places/related-articles/fishing-economy-in-the-sea-of-galilee>

What Jesus is doing, of course, echoes the heart of Israel's God of Exodus who said, "I have heard my people's cry. I will bear their pain. I will set them free." (Exodus 3:7-8) God's gracious involvement through Moses disrupted the system of oppression set up by Pharaoh. And now someone even greater than Moses (God in the flesh - Jesus) gets involved with the world to bring "good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed." (Luke 4:18)

Grace gets into Peter's boat, a symbol of the oppression that was crushing Peter's humanity, literally threatening his life, and for that matter threatening the lives of everyone involved (Jews, Gentiles and Romans alike).

Grace doesn't stay at a distance. Grace doesn't stay silent. Grace doesn't remain uninvolved. Grace doesn't discount the realities of oppression that manifest themselves personally, interpersonally, institutionally and culturally in our world.

Grace gets in the boat. Grace speaks these hopeful words that another world is possible - a world in which there is abundance for everyone - life for everyone. A world that reflects the reign of God for black people, for white people, for southerners, for northerners, for older adults, for young people, for gay people, for straight people, for women, for men, for transgendered, cisgendered, for people from the United States and people who are from Mexico, for people who are democrats, republican and neither, for people who are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, non-religious and atheist.

Jesus is not waiting around for people to believe a certain thing or do a certain thing before he decides to move close to them. That is what grace does. Grace gets in the boat.

After Jesus got in Peter's boat and taught him this good news, he invited Peter to put his nets out in the deep water (Luke 5:4). *Peter took the risk of trusting Jesus by doing what he said*. And something Peter never could have imagined took place. Abundance erupted. Life erupted. So much life that the

system of oppression represented in that little boat began to sink like it was being baptized under the water!

Here is the really good news . . . the life that Jesus calls us toward is not a zero sum game in which the tables are turned and those who had been oppressed become the oppressor. That is the great fear - that this is a competition and there isn't enough to recognize, understand and appreciate everyone's humanity. This is a lie that Jesus exposes again and again.

In our current context, people assume that removing the Confederate symbols of oppression (statues, flags, etc) from our public spaces will reduce (erase?!?) the humanity of southern culture and heritage. That's an assumption of scarcity, not abundance.

In our current context, people assume that violence and fear is the only language that will transform a hardened heart of an oppressor. (This is the basis of all our national defense policy in this country, by the way).

There is another way. There is a life that is abundant for both white southerners like me (David) who's ancestors fought in the civil war, owned slaves, flew the confederate flag and grew up watching the Dukes of Hazzard and for black southerners who have born the weight of this oppression for over 400 years with little progress.

The way we're talking about is not salvation for souls only in the sweet by and by. This escapist and gnostic gospel is not what Jesus was offering Peter. We're talking about abundance for bodies **and** souls here and now, and beyond that. We're talking about being an answer to that prayer "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth... as it is in heaven.

As a white southerner who identifies with Confederate heritage, I (David) lose nothing by acknowledging and working to heal the "hidden wound" of racism that is woven through the culture that I was born into at personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels. It is not a loss for me and my identity to put these symbols of the Confederacy in museums and private cemeteries rather than in the center of our cities public space. What I've found is that doing this allows me space to heal as much as my black brothers and sisters.

We are assuming abundance and not scarcity. We are assuming that we do not have to operate a "zero sum game" with winners and losers. Our faith gives us that hope.

This quote from Nelson Mandela from his book, "Long Walk to Freedom" sums it up well.

"I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is being taken away from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity."

Let's act like we are all set free. Because we are through the grace of God.

If you are interested in exploring this way of life together in a diverse group of people across our community, please join us every Tuesday at 12:00-1:15pm for Community Conversation in St Augustine. It's open to everyone through Zoom meeting.

And please join us on Sunday afternoon at 4:00 p.m. in the city plaza for the next protest of all the ways racism manifests itself at personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels. As we continue to move closer to the broken places of our lives and community with the hope of Jesus, abundance, liberation and salvation for everyone awaits us! (Please wear PPE if you come).

Grace is everywhere,
Pastors David and Carolyn