



## Novena of Grace 2021

**Readings:** Daniel 3: 25, 34-43 | Psalm 25: 4-5ab, 6, 7bc, 8-9 | Matthew 18: 21-35

**Grace:** We pray for the grace to heal, forgive and repair,  
letting our hearts be merciful.

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### The Holy Work of Repair

It is wonderful to be here with you tonight for our first evening of our *Novena of Grace: a Lenten Retreat in Everyday Life*. The theme is: *Heal Our Hearts for a Mission of Mercy*.

In our lives, we have been quarantined and some of us isolated from our families. This Lenten retreat is a time for us to be still and listen to the movements of God. As believers we can cling to the hope that Christ brings.

The vaccination started with health care workers, residents of long-term care facilities, front line essential workers and the elderly, people with underlying medical conditions, and is now being expanded to include more groups for an enlarging demographic, like teachers, people with disabilities and more. Even as we roll out more information about the effectiveness and safety of the COVID-19 vaccines, more people are receiving it.

I read an article that stated the happiest places in medicine is anywhere there is a vaccine and the happiest people in medicine are the ones plunging it into the arms of strangers. "It is a joy to us all," said a Kaiser Permanente nurse vaccinating people in North Carolina. "I do not think I have ever had a more fulfilling and promising experience." It is in this hope that we begin our retreat.

In the Gospel today in Matthew, Peter approached Jesus and asked him "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him?" "As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times."

In the parable of the unforgiving servant, punished for his hardness of heart toward his fellow servant, it teaches us that those who are unwilling to forgive exclude themselves from divine forgiveness. He forgave from the deepest place in his heart.

In the reading from Daniel, we are reminded to follow God with a contrite heart and humble spirit and God will receive us.



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When we forgive a debt and settle it, we must have a healthy dose of forgetfulness to forgive, not holding onto resentment.

Forgiveness is a university we ALL need to enroll in. "Forgive as He has forgiven us," Pope Francis says. "People need the mercy of God and the healing of the Holy Spirit to root out the sin in our lives. They cannot do it on their own. We must open ourselves to a relationship with God. As we dwell in His presence, we embrace His ways. His way is the forgiving way!"

Forgiveness is not an easy thing, and it does not come naturally to people. Racism can be a challenge to this notion of forgiveness. Those wronged, marginalized, or demonized are tempted to feel hatred and seek revenge.

In the Spring of 2020 when we saw a racial reckoning in the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. And it was not just the violence against our Black bodies that the police or hatred of us (anti-black racism) metted out, but this virus called COVID 19 seemed to affect us and make us sicker than others. It ravaged through our communities like wildfire spreading our fear and forcing us to fight to protect our health and well-being.

The blatant racial health disparities caused by systemic racism, income inequality and other social determinants of health has compounded the crisis and lays bare the blatant inequalities and health disparities that disproportionately affect communities of color and low-income communities.

These scream at us every day in the numbers of deaths and the failure of the science of healthcare delivery systems. Knowing that there are efforts being made to vaccinate the most vulnerable in our community is a relief. So the repair begins...Healing can now be planted in us.

Forgetting about the sin of racism which continues to grow, live and multiply may take more than just saying "we forgive" with our words. Howard Thurman says, in *The Luminous Darkness*, "Acknowledging the presence of prejudice in the human condition and in ourselves is an essential step toward wholeness." There is real spiritual growth in admitting that one's life is not blameless even as one is dedicated effectively to working for the blameless life.



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Sometimes we are in a hurry to have the past forgotten.

Only the divine forgiveness that Jesus speaks of can help us overcome such feelings and sentiments. **Forgiveness liberates and heals.** We have a responsibility to dig deep and investigate his word. We need to sit in humility and follow him with our whole heart.

We must dwell in his presence, sit at his feet and do as he does. In living out the Gospel, there is repentance and repair.

Kayla Craig, the author of *To Light Their Way*, a collection of prayers and liturgies for parents, writes, "We acknowledge that we are not immune to the human condition and we repent from ways we have benefited from dehumanizing systems and structures. We ask for your holy guidance. Ignite in us a spirit of generosity, of hope and mercy. Cleanse our spirits, comfort our minds, care for our bodies and Make Us New! We give thanks that you lavish your grace onto us. Not pushing us into shame, but providing a steadfast comfort."

Repair is Holy Work.

Our hearts have to be opened and hardened ones can be softened by dwelling in God's presence and knowing God's ways.

Barbara Henderson  
Day 1 | March 9, 2021

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### Reflection questions:

- *How can we name and accept the truth of the sin of racism?*
- *How can we advance the holy work of liberating forgiveness?*
- *How can we begin or continue our journey towards actions that dismantle systemic racism?*