



Novena of Grace 2021

Readings: Deuteronomy 4: 1, 5-9 | Psalm 147: 12-13, 15-16, 19-20 | Matthew 5: 17-19

Grace: We pray for the grace to recognize and live God's love,
letting our hearts be courageous.

I imagine myself in the crowd of onlookers gathered on a hill in Galilee. I feel a cool breeze off the sea that feels nice on this hot Galilean day.

I came to listen to this man Jesus that I have been hearing about. This man has been teaching in synagogues, curing disease and illness. What does he offer me? What does he want of me? How might his words change my life?

Then I hear his words – “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law... I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law.”

What? What does Jesus mean? Surely, this is the same Jesus who cures on the Sabbath, the same Jesus who flips tables at the temple, the same Jesus who spends time with tax collectors and foreigners? Isn't he here to disrupt the laws? I confess myself confused – maybe even disappointed.

At the start of each new quarter, I (present-day Corbin) as an educator, have to establish classroom rules and expectations. I remember my first year teaching - fresh out of university and off to teach high school students not much younger than I. I was nervous about being taken seriously, so I spent a long time gathering advice, looking through colleagues' classroom rules, and worrying about how best to ensure the students' safety and establish my authority. I was told to be strict- that it is easier to loosen up midway through the year than to try to impose new rules – as one colleague put it, “don't smile until Christmas.” Eventually I decided on classroom rules that I thought would make for an optimal learning environment. Of course, it didn't take long for my well-thought-out classroom management plan to be tested.

Early in my first year of teaching, a student – let's call him Jim – swore in my class. When reprimanded, he doubled down and swore at me. I sent Jim to the hall and after giving instructions to the class, I followed him to discuss what had happened, away from his peers. So far, my classroom management plan was working – next I would calmly give Jim a sufficient punishment to prevent this happening again, all according to the rules.



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I stepped into the hall, my heart racing about 200 beats per minute and my hands shaking from adrenaline. I wasn't used to dealing with this much student anger. Jim was also visibly shaking and looked closer to fighting than talking. It was clear things could get dicey, so I decided to walk him to the principal's office. On our way there, Jim stopped and said, "Sir, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gotten out of control like that." I was floored. I had been ready to be strict - to follow my rules to the letter, but his words diffused the situation, and God's grace filled the space between us, leading me to find compassion. We turned around and agreed to discuss the situation at a later time, and I let Jim regain his composure in a separate room before returning to class. Our conversation after school that day was the first of many in what grew into a very positive relationship.

If you ever get the chance to look through a microscope, take it – everything is much cooler under a microscope. And then you shift to a higher power lens and all of the sudden you see so much more – you see the building blocks of life - cells and even organelles within cells that are everywhere but you just can't see them without the proper lens. This experience with Jim was like changing lenses on a microscope. Yes safety and respect are important parts of the classroom, but in shifting my lens I saw that love and compassion were at the heart of my classroom. My rules only made sense if they upheld the dignity of my students. When carrying out the rules no longer pointed toward love and compassion, they could be set aside – well, except "don't play with acid in the biology lab." That one has no leeway.

My teaching experience helps me understand what Jesus means when he says, "I come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill." Jesus doesn't want us to throw away our microscopes, he wants us to switch the lens through which we are observing life.

Returning to the mountainside, I now see that Jesus is calling for neither the abolition of the Jewish law, nor a Pharisaical approach that puts strict adherence to the law above love and compassion. In this land of Galilee, where sickness and poverty are far too common, where unjust laws are used to imprison or kill, and where our customs tell us that people unlike us cannot be loved by us or even by God; we hear that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. We see the life of Jesus is our living example – the lens through which we are supposed to examine our own lives. When Jesus calls us into his mission of mercy, we are commissioned by - or co-missioned with Jesus to be love and compassion to those around us, in particular to those marginalized by our laws and customs.



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Where I have authority – such as a classroom – and in my personal relationships, I can use the lens of Jesus' life to see how I can treat those around me with love and compassion. *And*, I can use that lens to see where my mission of mercy is calling me into action. As we turn our lens of love and compassion on our present times, we notice the same wounds borne by the marginalized in our society as those in the Galilean people we just left.

There are still far too many folks suffering in pain and illness, especially now in the midst of a global pandemic that has disproportionately impacted immigrants and communities of color. Jesus healed people on the Sabbath, placing human life above laws, to fulfill the law of love and compassion. How am I called to use my Sabbath to highlight the biases and brokenness of a system that fails to hold sacred the health of ailing sisters and brothers?

There are still way too many folks incarcerated. Dr. Martin Luther King said in his letter from a Birmingham Jail, "One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws... Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."¹ Jesus flipped tables in the market in disobedience of unjust laws, to fulfill the law of love and compassion. How am I called to flip tables, marching alongside my sisters and brothers against the injustices of our justice system?

There are still too many folks who believe they are unlovable, even by God. Pope Francis says that God "does not limit [God's self] merely to affirming [God's] love, but makes it visible and tangible. Love, after all, can never be just an abstraction. By its very nature, it indicates something concrete: intentions, attitudes, and behaviors that are shown in daily living."² Jesus made God's love visible and tangible to those who society cast out, to fulfill the law of love and compassion. How am I called to make visible and tangible God's love and compassion to those who most need to feel it? How am I to shape my intentions, attitudes, and behaviors in imitation of Jesus? How am I called into the mission of mercy?

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Day 2 | March 10, 2021

¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (April 16, 1963).

² Francis, Bishop of Rome, *Misericordiae Vultus* (2015), [9].



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Reflection questions:

- *When I use the lens of love and compassion to examine my relationships, where do I see room for mercy?*
- *When I turn the lens of love and compassion on the injustices of our world, where do I feel called to action in the mission of mercy?*