



Novena of Grace 2021

Readings: Ezekiel 47: 1-9, 12 | Psalm 46: 2-3, 5-6, 8-9 | John 5: 1-16

Grace: We pray for the grace to share the heart of Jesus with those most in need.

Day Eight

Water, flowing abundantly and freely. Water, rising refreshingly and invigoratingly.

What are images that come to your memory and thoughts when you hear the scripture stories this evening about water: water copiously flowing from the temple of God in the Old Testament, water in an abundant and refreshing and healing pool in the New Testament?

I'm reminded of how much I enjoyed water in summer months here as a youth in Puget Sound country. "Running through the hose" meant playing in the sprinkler, cooling down in such a refreshing -- and inexpensive -- way! Or wading in the Puget Sound as the tide was bringing the salt water closer for a good swim or a float on an inflated inner tube.

The reading from Ezekiel tells of water flowing out from the temple to form a river of abundant life, fresh and refreshing life. And the Gospel story tells how Jesus deals with the crippled man who cannot reach the saving waters of the huge healing pool.

I'm struck by the quiet but strong message I hear in the scripture of this eighth day of the Novena of Grace. I'm struck by the earnest desire for some of that strong, saving, healing water to be at hand right now, around me now, in these days of COVID-19. Water better than vaccines, more powerful than new discoveries, more available than waiting, waiting. And -- and this is such an important point -- more accessible without discrimination on the basis of color or creed, wealth or poverty, politics or position.

Yes, something that this whole saga of the deadly COVID pandemic has bluntly revealed to me and to you is the split, the dichotomy, the discrimination of how people are exposed and infected, treated and healed. I wonder, for example, if God had any intention in letting the deadly COVID pandemic spread here in the USA at the same time as the deadly systemic racism (consequence of slavery) was becoming more and more obvious to us. "I can't breathe" is spoken by a black man under the knee of a police officer; "I can't breathe" is spoken by a COVID infectee gasping through an oxygen respirator.



Novena of Grace 2021

What COVID has done for us is to reveal in real human facts, facts about our sisters and brothers, the disparities that systemic racism -- historical and contemporary -- has imposed on our sisters and brothers all around us here in the USA.,

Is our good God teaching us all a lesson, a lesson painful to learn but saving to practice, that accepting systemic racism as inevitable or, even worse, desirable, is anti-Christian. Working for racial justice is a requirement of our baptism!

Again, I'm thinking of the Gospel story of that man laying so close to the huge temple pool of saving waters. Unable to reach the water's salvific movement. But Jesus comes along and rescues him with the words "Rise, take up your mat, and walk!"

One of the stories I read about St. Francis Xavier in preparing for this Novena of Grace tells how he was disrespected by the European business people in southern India where he had landed from his trip to Asia. Xavier instructed and baptised the poor, the sick, the neglected Indians he encountered. He answered their calls for care, for assistance, for love. But this irritated the colonialists who were there in India only make money, not to provide care for the locals. Xavier saw this disregard based on race -- the Indians were not white Europeans! -- and he responded with Christian love which accepts no racial and ethnic discrimination.

Let me be honest. Francis Xavier might have done more, possibly should have done more. But he lived in a period and a place of history not so very different from ours of today -- officially white people were respected as truly human and were to be treated that way.

Because I don't think it is out of place to raise up this issue during the 2021 Novena of Grace -- especially when we are praying today for the grace of sharing the heart of Jesus with those most in need -- let me share briefly some thoughts about how COVID has revealed our deep national divisions. Let's imagine Jesus sharing this information with us.

For example: Black Americans are infected with COVID-19 at nearly three times the rate of white Americans. This is according to a new document from the [National Urban League](#). The report, based on data from Johns Hopkins University, also shows black Americans are twice as likely to die from the virus. The infection rate for blacks is 62 per 10,000, compared with 23 per 10,000 for whites. Latinos see even more infections: 73 per 10,000.



Novena of Grace 2021

During the early months of the pandemic, the report asserts that blacks were more likely to have preexisting conditions that predispose them to COVID-19 infection, less likely to have health insurance, and more likely to work in jobs that do not accommodate remote work -- the "social distancing" we all have become accustomed to!

Conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, play, and worship affect a wide range of health risks and outcomes, such as COVID-19 infection, severe illness, and death. These conditions are known as *social determinants of health*. Long-standing systemic health and social inequities have put many people from racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk of dying from COVID-19. These are the sad facts we need to face when we talk about the COVID pandemic here in the USA this past year. And they are facts that must deal with if the pandemic is truly to pass away from our midst. And they are facts that we need especially to pray over during this Novena.

Let me return to a theme I shared with you a few nights ago during the Novena- the theme of light. I want to quote tonight from another poem, not by the celebrated young poet Amanda Gorman, but by a Jesuit friend of mine, Fr. Pat Twohy, S.J.. From his Seattle base, Pat serves our sisters and brothers who are members of the Indigenous nations here in the Pacific Northwest.

Pat writes about the light that truly is within us:

*This light within us and within all things
Needs to be enkindled
By our feeble acts of love,
Our emptiness, our reaching out.*

*Yet it is always there,
Greater than the force of a thousand suns,
Ready to shine through our eyes,
Tired with weeping,
And lighten up the whole world.*

You and I know that we so much need that light now. And so on this eighth day of our Novena, we pray for the grace of sharing the heart of Jesus with those most in need!

Fr. Pete Henriot, S.J.
Day 8 | March 16, 2021



Novena of Grace 2021

Reflection Questions:

*Who are people around me -- family members and relatives, coworkers and strangers -
- who are most in need of my loving assistance at this time?*