



Café ([boldcafe.org](http://boldcafe.org)) is a monthly on-line magazine for and with young adult women made possible from support from women's groups active in Women of the ELCA ([welca.org](http://welca.org)), the women's organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

## Grace in the wilderness

by SommerAnn McCullough

We are living in wilderness times. This pandemic has brought fear, isolation and uncertainty into our daily routines.

I have been struggling to find hope and motivation in these challenging times. It is even harder to remember to give myself grace.

"At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.

Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit.

For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: 'Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.'" (*Jeremiah 31:1-6*)

In the book of Jeremiah, the people of Israel are living in exile. Stripped of their everyday routines, they feel alone and forgotten.

But, in these trying times of isolation, they still find "grace in the wilderness."

They know God will keep God's promises. That there will come a day when "again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of merrymakers." This isolation is not forever.



This exile is not forever.

## **Finding grace**

How can we find grace in our wilderness? In these challenging times, how can we embody God's promise that "I have loved you with an everlasting love?" How can we bring God's grace into the present?

In Acts, Paul reminds us of our calling to share God's grace with those around us. But, showing God's grace during these trying times can feel impossible.

"And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace." (Acts 20:22-24)

All of our emotions are heightened during this time of sheltering in place. Family members or roommates can get on our nerves. Frustration piles up more than usual.

It is difficult to give ourselves grace when our family, work and social spaces have become one. Extending God's grace and patience to our families, friends and colleagues can feel out of reach.

Paul reminds us that our ministry is to testify to God's grace, especially in these challenging moments. No matter what the future may hold, pointing others toward God's grace and sharing the ministry of forgiveness, love and acceptance, is our calling.

The next time a family member returns from a grocery trip without a must-have item or a colleague upsets you, take a step back. Inhale, exhale and think about how to extend God's grace at that moment. We can try to bring love and compassion to a challenging situation instead of reacting out of fear and frustration. Remember that it is up to each of us to embody God's ministry of grace, especially in these times of uncertainty.

## **Closing prayer**

Dear God, full of grace, love, and compassion, please strengthen me during this time of isolation and fear. Help me not only to find grace in my own wilderness but to extend your grace to those around me. When I am frustrated and lose patience, please teach me how to embody your forgiveness and reflect your love through my actions. Amen.

## Discussion questions

1. Where is one place you can find grace in your wilderness this week?
2. How has the pandemic affected your relationships?
3. What are three ways you can share God's grace with people in your life this month?



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# Accepting God's radical grace

by SommerAnn McCullough

During the season of Lent, I started a Bible Study group at my church. I was excited to create this space for anyone who wanted to learn more about the lectionary we hear each Sunday in worship. I wanted to build community, dig deeper into the weekly Scripture, and ask each other tough questions.

But, if I am being honest for a minute, I also believed that organizing this Bible Study made me a better Christian.

Not only would I understand the Scripture better so I could be a stronger disciple, but I was doing the important work of sharing God's Word with more people. I was spiritually patting myself on the back for being a leader in my church and for acting in a way God would undoubtedly reward.

Does this sound familiar? Have you ever taken on a leadership role in your church community and felt like a better Christian because of it?

But we know that the rewards system we have created in our heads is the exact opposite of what God's grace encompasses.

What is grace?

Grace is the wild, progressive concept at the core of Martin Luther's theology. As members of the Lutheran church, we are invited to believe that God's grace is more powerful than our sins and shortcomings. It is to believe that God will extend love and acceptance to all of us without us having to earn a single thing.

When is the last time you were given something without having to earn it?

It is such a counter-cultural concept, especially in our capitalist society. But if we are to live into our calling as Christians, we need to accept this freely-given grace.

## **Stop Trying to Earn Grace**

Having to earn God's love is a concept that hits very close to home. After all, we are taught that we need to earn almost everything in our life from the very beginning.

An incomplete list of things I have been taught to earn:

Good grades  
A teacher's approval  
Dessert after dinner  
A paycheck

What would you add to your list? Because we have been taught to earn our food, our friendships, and our love, it comes as no surprise that we also feel compelled to earn God's grace.

Martin Luther writes: "I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith." [1]

As Luther reminds us, God has justified us through faith. Not through our actions, our to-do lists, or the leadership roles we take on in the church.

God extends mercy to us, no matter what we have done, or left undone.

## **Accept God's Unconditional Grace**

But knowing that God gives us this grace, and freely welcoming this grace into our lives, are two very different things. It is hard to turn off the rewards-based part of our brain, urging us to sign-up for another church committee, or share our long prayer list on social media.

But, that is what makes God's grace so radical. You can never be a "better" Christian, and you will never be more deserving of this grace.

I invite you to step into this grace. Grace that you did not earn. Grace that you cannot lose in the future. Grace that will never wear thin or be taken back.

This week, I hope to live into a small part of this radical grace. Instead of congratulating myself for sharing a ministry-focused post on Instagram, writing this article, or leading my Bible Study, I want to take a step back and know that I am no better or worse for any of these endeavors. God loves me, accepts me, and calls me worthy regardless of my actions. I am not earning gold stars in God's grading book, I am simply living out my



faith in a way that is authentic and meaningful to me.

When you find yourself wrestling with God's grace, read over the first chapter of John, where it says:

"And the Word became flesh and stayed for a little while among us; we saw the Word's glory – the favor and position a parent gives an only child – filled with grace, filled with truth. Out of Jesus' fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given." (John 1:14,16)

Reflect on these verses, challenge yourself to live into God's radical grace, and extend that grace to those around you.

### **Closing prayer**

God, your grace and your love are more than I can ever imagine. Please be with me as I step into your grace this week, as I challenge my need to earn your love, and as I extend your radical acceptance to those around me. Amen.

### **Discussion questions**

1. What are three things you feel the need to earn in your life?
2. What is one step you can take to live out grace in your life next week?
3. How can your life be transformed by God's grace?



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