

Novena of Grace  
Thursday 3.8.18  
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Welcome to our 6th Novena day together. It is a joy to continue this journey with you. As we've spent these days together, faces have begun to feel familiar. We continue to gather, bringing ourselves and our prayers to God and to one another, trusting that through the intercession of St Francis Xavier and this St Ignatius community, we will find deeper reconciliation, deeper trust in God's mercy and ability to surprise us, and deeper hope that we will be healed. I noticed that the buds on our branches overlooking our intentions have started to bloom; a symbol for me that God's Spirit of hope and beauty and rebirth is at work in this place.

I struggled with writing today's reflection. And not just because I was tired, and one of my cats decided it would be a good time to sit on my keyboard, and my phone kept alerting me to new news notifications and how many steps I still needed to take, and my anxious brain worried I'd have nothing thoughtful to say - that my peace-well had run dry. But also because this Peace stuff is hard. It is hard to hold. To maintain. It takes attention and patience and openness and tolerance and vulnerability and intentionality, and it never ends. It can be exhausting and overwhelming.

Peacemaking is this thing that feels unattainable. Like a goal we'll never actually reach. Like it is against our worldly nature to let it go on for too long. If Peace is an undisturbed bed of flowers with bees and butterflies moving daintily from bloom to bloom, everything working together in harmony, I feel like our days are backhoes, tearing it up and leaving it in ruins. We spend so much time trying to figure out where the backhoe came from or how to get more flowers, or if there's a different way to replant them or ways to try to protect the bed or just spending energy scooping dirt up with our hands, that I fear it can feel easier to just let the bed go. To stop trying. To let go of flowers and be satisfied with an empty lot. But how much less beautiful, how much less glorious would our world be without these blooms, even if we only glimpse them for moments.

Peacemaking in our world is the part of peace I struggle with the most. The peacemaking that takes practice and support and care and the need to do it together, in community. How can I work for peace and tolerance and acceptance in my everyday? How can I support those around me in doing the same? How can I do my part to replant the flower bed, using my gifts and talents?

In today's first reading, we hear about a community that has stopped listening to God. Of a community with hardened hearts. Maybe of a community that stopped replanting their flower bed; who let their hope die. How can we ensure that isn't what happens to us? How do we recharge and reconnect with the wellspring of God's love that does not run dry, so that we can go out and try to do it again tomorrow? How do we ensure we can be the Peacemakers God calls us to be?

In our Gospel, Jesus talks about the importance of staying aligned - of not letting the house of the faithful be divided. He speaks of two kingdoms - and the importance of knowing which side you are on.

The kingdom of worldly things works each day to derail our peacemaking. Works to distract us and hold us back and keep our flower beds bare. Call it Satan. Call it the enemy of our human nature, call it our egos or our selfishness. Call it fear or power or pride or a need to control or a lack of trust. Call it drama and noise and distraction. Call it what you will, it is not of God. And it is not the world Jesus is calling us to when he asks us to stand with him.

In the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, there is a powerful meditation called the Two Standards. Pope Francis sums this meditation up nicely: "The world tells us to seek success, power and money. God tells us to seek humility, service and love." How can we continue to align and re-align and re-align ourselves to this work of peacemaking and building God's kingdom of love and acceptance and wholeness and a place for all at the table, especially when the world is constantly trying to distract us with shiny things.

Fr Greg Boyle also spoke about this meditation in a recent On Being interview with Krista Tippett. She asked Fr Greg about his call to be a Jesuit. He said:

"[Being a Jesuit] is about being in companionship with Jesus. St. Ignatius, in his spiritual exercises, has a meditation called "The Two Standards." And in it, he says very simply, "See Jesus standing in the lowly place."

It's not about saluting a set of beliefs necessarily, it's about walking with Jesus and being a companion. And I haven't found anything that's brought me more life or joy than standing with Jesus, but also with the particularity of standing in the lowly place, with the easily despised and the readily left out, and with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop, and with the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away. And I find the fullness of life in trying to, as best I can in my own way, to stand there."

Peace is hard. Maintaining a peaceful heart, peaceful relationships, a peaceful world - takes work. We live in a culture that fights peace on all fronts. That thrives on conflict and drama and disconnection. Of measuring ourselves and always being found wanting. Of discontent. Of seeking pride and riches and honor, rather than the humility and poverty and lowly places Jesus invites us into.

This culture also asks us to be in conflict with one another - whether it be in our personal relationships, in our community relationships, or in our relationships across communities. The us versus them, the me versus you, the scarcity of not enoughts and I need to get mine. This constant barrage of inputs taps into this place in ourselves where we are not acting from a place of God and where we are not cultivating peace in our world.

So how can we hold one another in the lowly places. In the places of violence and war. In the places of oppression and ostracization. In the places of school shootings and refugee crises and deportations and lack of healthcare and addiction and loss of affordable housing. In the places of mass incarceration and institutional racism and systemic poverty and the abuse of women and discrimination of the LGBTQ community and marginalization of people with disabilities and the list goes on and on and on. In the places where Jesus stood, with the people Jesus stood with. In the places where we are most in need of the hope that comes from replanting our flower beds daily, with the hope that one day the bulldozing and tearing up will stop and we can together reap the beauty of peace in our days.

How can we support one another, show up for one another, bring our God-given gifts and talents into service of one another, and move from peace in ourselves to peace in our relationships to peace in our communities, and ultimately, to peace in our world? How can our standing in the lowly places create ripple effects, reap benefits we never imagined?

And how can we support one another when we are exhausted, stressed out, anxious, isolated, hurting? How can we show up for one another when the tasks seem so insurmountable and the work so hard? Where can we seek solace and recenter ourselves so that we can go back into the everyday and be the Peacemakers Jesus called us to be?

I invite us to take time during these Novena days, to pray for creative energy, renewed spirits and the wisdom of St Francis Xavier and St Ignatius, so that we can go out into our world and be forces of peace.

The poet Adrienne Rich wrote:

*What would it mean to live  
in a city whose people were changing  
each other's despair into hope? -  
You yourself must change it. -  
what would it feel like to know  
your country was changing? -  
You yourself must change it. -  
Though your life felt arduous  
new and unmapped and strange  
what would it mean to stand on the first  
page of the end of despair?*

May this Novena of Grace continue to be a place where we strengthen ourselves and one another, so that we can stand on that first page of the end of despair. Where we can stand aligned together against hardened hearts and continue to sow seeds of peace, trusting one day they will bloom.