

The Grace of God Has No Boundaries

BY JANA CHILDERS

Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday

March 3, 2019



In 2019, on Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday, we honor women who exhibit grace that knows no boundaries. Though Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday is March 3, 2019, your congregation or women's groups may use this resource on any day that you choose.

The idea that God is a boundary-crosser is not new. Nor is the thought that God's grace flows through the world unhampered by human-made borders. These ideas were part of Jewish thought long before Peter had the boundary-busting vision recorded in Acts 10. Ancient Israel worshipped the stranger-loving "God of Gods" (Deut. 10:17–18) who "remove(d) boundaries" (Is. 10:13) and exemplified "impartiality" (2 Chr. 19:7). Certainly, by the time Peter came along, the idea that God might choose to cross divisions created by God's

own people—the kind William James referred to as accidental fences we build against the stream of our connectedness¹—was not new.

But transcending boundaries must have felt completely new to Peter. How do we know that? Because it feels that way to most every one of us when we see God's grace transcending boundaries.

It is not difficult now to think of Peter's Acts 10 sermon helping to break down the boundaries the early Christians had set around God's grace. In our day and age, we are hardly scandalized by the thought that God's grace extends even to Gentiles. Nor is it troubling to sing of God's hands cradling the whole world or Jesus loving "all the little children of the world."² These things are not challenging to us today. Few of our congregations "fence the table"—deliver an address before communion to distinguish who ought to come to the table and who should not—the way some of our parents' churches did. Few restrict membership in the church or admissions to its cemeteries in ways that used to be common.

These days we *celebrate* God's grace blowing through the structures that once held back women's leadership or opposed children's rights or delayed justice for victims of domestic violence. We are happy about this grace. But when the time comes for us to see God's grace extend across a boundary that has comforted or advantaged us, it can feel like a whole new thing, and it can feel risky enough that we might think twice about being part of it.

I imagine crossing barriers made Mildred Grady think twice and then some. She was an earnest African American teacher and librarian who worked at a high school in Arkansas in the 1950s. One of her students was a truant, shoplifting senior named Olly Neal. He pushed back on her attempts to teach him—turning away, mocking her publicly and bringing her to tears. One day, he wandered into the school library and was drawn to a book with a slightly risqué cover—*The Treasure of Pleasant Valley* by Frank Yerby. Because Olly didn't want to be thought of as someone who would ever check a book out of a library, he swiped it. As he read it at home under the covers that night, a new world opened. Later, when he sneaked it back onto the shelf of the library, he discovered there was another Frank Yerby book he had not noticed before. He took that one, too. The pattern continued, with Olly swiping, reading, returning, discovering, swiping, reading, returning, discovering—through four cycles. Enough, of course, for a conversion to occur. A reader was born.

Only many years later did Olly Neal—the first African American to be appointed district prosecuting attorney in Arkansas, then judge, then appellate court judge—find out the truth. Mrs. Grady had seen him take that first book. The next Saturday she had driven 70 miles to Memphis to see if she could find another book by that same author. She had no expense account, of course, as a teacher in a segregated black school. She paid for the books herself. It took her three tries to find a store with the book she was looking for and two more Saturday road trips to fill out the shelf. At the class reunion where Olly and Mrs. Grady finally compared notes, she told him how excited she had been to see him swipe that second book.³

Extending the hand of grace across all kinds of divides is what the people of God do. It is God's own work so often done by his daughters and always blessed by God's love.

A Service for the Worship of God

Opening Sentences

Psalm 29, adapted

Leader: Let us praise the God of glory
and of strength.

All: Let us worship the God of grace.

Leader: For the voice of God goes out
across all the earth.

**All: And in God's temple all the
people say, "Glory!"**

Gathering Prayer

God of Grace and Glory, from time immemorial you have moved across the face of the earth, pouring out mercy, ladling compassion and favor, sending the rain on the just and unjust. In Jesus Christ, you showed us the love that knows no bounds, the grace that has no limits. Your Spirit blows through the world still—extending your favor and splintering the barriers we erect between us. Out of your infinite riches you give your people grace to see your face in those of others, to trust your faithfulness and to lead others into your love. We are a grateful people, humbled by your lavish gifts. Meet us now in this hour of worship, that we may be opened to your Word and to the joy of serving you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Call to Confession

Leader: Not one of us is perfect.

All: No, not one.

Leader: Not one of us is full of grace.

All: No, not one.

Leader: Not one of us is spotless.

All: No, not one.

Leader: There is no one who knows
God's fullness or rests completely
in God's grace.

**All: Therefore, let us approach
God's throne together.**

Leader: Let us confess our sin.

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God, you know us better than
we know ourselves. Find in us, we pray,
the pockets of resistance and patches
of coldness that keep us closed to your
movement among us. Root them out
and open us that we may be agents of
your grace and channels of your love.
In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

As far as the East is from the West,
so far has God removed our sin from us.
As near as hands and feet and breath,
so near does God stand with us. As close
as the Spirit's tether can draw, so close
does God bring us together. Friends,
believe the Good News; in Jesus Christ,
we are forgiven.

Suggested Hymns⁴

"In Christ There Is No East or West" (GtG 317)

"God Welcomes All" (GtG 399)

"There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" (GtG 435)

"Look Who Gathers at Christ's Table!" (GtG 506)

"Sing Glory to the Name of God" (GtG 10)

Prayer for Illumination

Be in our words, O God, and in our
understanding.

Be in our hearts and in the love we bring.

Be in our lives and set us to praise, we pray.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Scripture Reading(s)

Isaiah 42:1–9

Psalms 29

Acts 10:34–43

Matthew 3:13–17

Sermon

Hymn

See suggestions in previous column.

A Litany for Women Who Carry God's Grace Across Boundaries

Leader: For Rahab's red cord and for all
who risk their lives to give refuge
to your people,

All: We thank you, O God.

Leader: For Ruth's loyalty and Esther's
courage, and for all who serve
you in foreign lands,

All: We thank you, O God.

Leader: For Deborah's leadership and
Miriam's dance and for all who
break glass ceilings,

All: We thank you, O God.

Leader: For Sarah's faithfulness and Jael's
fierceness and for all who take
things into their own hands,

All: We thank you, O God.

Leader: For Hagar and all the unnamed
women who survived to do
your will in the wilderness,

All: We thank you, O God.

Leader: For the Alabaster Jar Woman and for
all who flout convention in your name,

All: We thank you, O God.

Leader: For Mary Magdalene's heart
and for all who linger at the cross,

All: We thank you, O God.

Leader: For all the grace-filled women who
cross borders and dismantle fences,
who face down soldiers and walk
picket lines, who like Mary the Mother
of Jesus carry your love into the world,

All: We thank you, O God.

Hymn

See suggestions on previous page.

Benediction

Spiritual Practices in Crossing Boundaries

1. Keep in touch with several people who disagree with you on significant issues. Some people make a habit of regularly including "members of the loyal opposition" on their dinner party guest lists. Some make sure that 10 percent or more of their Facebook friends are people whose politics differ sharply from theirs. Some commit to reading a book—every three months or so—written from a world view that diverges from their own.
2. Build skills that stretch your ability to hold two things in tension. I knew a woman who practiced cross-handed piano playing, playing the treble clef with her left hand and the bass with her right, because, she said, "It makes you open minded." There are some people who arrange their place in the church choir so that as they sing God's praises, they will be sure to be standing next to someone with whom they know they disagree.

3. Adopt a mantra that helps you stay patient during disagreement. One pastor experimented for a year saying, "Of course they may be right," after every story about her critics. Another developed what she called "a soft-answer-turneth-away-wrath" ethic. Another has a sign over her desk that reads, "Of course you're not perfect. You're not pizza."

4. Increase your "attenuation." Although many factors contribute to an earthquake's effect, ground that has sustained a number of quakes often makes for better attenuation—the intensity of the movement as it makes its way through the ground decreases at a better rate. This may be due to the fact that the ground is more broken up. Spiritual hardness, whether is it associated with pride or fear or another ego-related issue, makes it harder to do the grace-filled work of crossing boundaries. Being broken up can make all the difference in absorbing the energy of the differences or conflicts associated with those tasks.

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Notes

1. William James, *Writings*, 1902–1910 (New York: Library of America, 1987), 1264.
2. From "Jesus Loves the Little Children," words by C. Herbert Woolston, music by George F. Root, 1864.
3. Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).
4. GtG indicates *Glory to God! The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013).