

Week 12: The Voice of Grace

It's 9pm, and I walk in the door still carrying the burdens of a day at my office. The kids are already in bed, eyelids heavy but holding out for a "goodnight" from Daddy. My wife is tired but smiling and happy to see me.

And I don't want any of it.

I stomp around, tearing open mail, griping about food that isn't in the fridge, acting like a serious jerk. And in some secret place inside of me, *I know it*. Somehow, this only makes it worse. I wait for the reprisal from my wife. The *well-earned* reprisal. The angry, "I don't deserve this!" But it isn't forthcoming. Instead, she kisses me on the cheek, says she loves me, and goes to bed with the same smile on her face. I stand by myself in the kitchen, but I have two companions. My bad mood.

And my wife's grace...

Psychologists are trained in an endless list of interventions for changing people. But the truth is, they all pale in comparison to the most powerful tool at our disposal. We call it by many names—empathy, acceptance, and "unconditional positive regard"—but it all boils down to this:

The therapy room is a pocket of grace in a condemning world.

Does that sound like a rip-off? After all, people come to us to be healed, right? How will anything be fixed, changed, improved, transformed, or redeemed if people are allowed to stay exactly the way they are? I understand the feeling. I've felt it. But I can tell you now, grace isn't just acceptance of the status quo. Grace *contains* the status quo—all of our struggle and pain and mess—and embraces us and values us *anyway*. Grace demands that nothing be changed for love and connection to happen, and that kind of love has *power*.

In the presence of grace, we are given permission to be our fullest selves: that complicated amalgam of mess and beauty, shame and glory. In the presence of grace, we can allow the wholeness of our humanity to be seen—we reveal our sputtering rage, anguished tears, petrified fear, crudest and rudest sentiment, most bizarre interest, or deepest embarrassment.

And then we look up.

And grace looks back. It isn't cringing or horrified or judging or saying in a reasonable tone, "Well, once we figure *that* out and change it, then you and I can get along alright." Instead, grace looks back with a calm admiration—probably even a smile in its eyes—and it says, "There you are, I've been waiting for you and you're welcome here. All of you. You are beloved." This is the brilliance of grace: it welcomes our darkness into the light and does nothing to it, knowing that it doesn't

have to, because darkness thrives on hiddenness, and it's at the mercy of the light. Light drives out darkness, not the other way around. When we no longer have to push our darkness back down beneath layers of shame our darkness doesn't stand a chance...

So I stand in the kitchen with my bad mood and my wife's grace. And the brilliance of her love quickly becomes clear. Her attack would have only rooted me deeper in my anger. Instead, she has given me acceptance in the midst of my anger, the space to feel it and experience the fullness of my self.

I still feel grumpy, but I discover there is something else there inside of me: I want to apologize. So I go to the bedroom and I tell her I'm sorry, and her response is quick and her grace is complete: "You had a long day, you're allowed to be in a bad mood. And you're a good man, I knew you'd apologize."

My wife saw my goodness, even in the midst of my junk. She believed in my light, even when all she could see was darkness. She believed in who I am and who I can be, even while I was acting like something else.

I used to say I believe in grace. I don't say that anymore. Now I say I have *known* grace, and what I know is this: grace believes in *me*.

And the healing power of grace does not end with the embrace of our darkness. When we experience grace—when our true self is finally allowed to the surface—we discover all sorts of beautiful things entwined with our darkness. Like dragging the ocean and coming up with a bunch of seaweed. *And some invaluable pearls.*

As grace calls our true self forth, we discover magnificent parts of us we didn't know were there—passions built into us, a purpose sewn into our DNA. Our identity is washed clean and we begin to see ourselves for what we inherently are: creators of beauty and abundance. We no longer dismiss our ability to contribute in loving ways to a crumbling world. We take the grace inside of us, it becomes our guide, and we become *it*.

We quit dead end jobs and risk our family's financial security to earn a teaching degree. We stop drinking and we start coaching. We quit living at the office and we invest in the life of our family. We trade in fear for boldness. We quit hiding in our homes and we start risking in the world by uncaging our ideas and our creativity. We stop waiting *on* perfection and we start wading *into* the mess. When we quit seeking change and begin to seek grace, we let go of our frantic effort to be like someone else, and we discover a blessed peace with who we are.

Finally.