

A letter from me, Jonathan Woolner,

A stumbling, joyful, deeply aware soul
That is always looking for the mysteries
that God has for us each day:
wondering what his voice will sound like

The one who is constantly reminded of my weaknesses,
learning the secret of being content,
A big fan and follower of the resurrected Christ

To all my brothers and sisters here at the Edgewater community

To those of you who find themselves on top of the world
You're asked how you're doing and you say 'better than ever'
And you actually mean it

And to those of you who can barely drag themselves
out of bed each morning
To those who have recently lost their job
To those of you whose children are making choices that are breaking your heart
And whose children are faced with pressures and challenges that just make life hard

Whose friends don't get it
To the lonely, the depressed, the confused, the doubting
To those who find it very hard to swallow the idea of a good and loving God
Much less an open tomb or a new creation
To all of you
Grace and Peace!

My letter begins with grace and peace
Because I feel like it's the best place to start any conversation; human interaction;
and moment

6 months ago we began with grace and peace
so it only seemed right to me to end with grace and peace as I write this to you all

in all my prayers for you
I desire for us to get a handle on grace and peace
no wait; I think I want something deeper than that.....
for grace and peace get a handle on us

yeah.....that's a game changer right there

because when that happens; and I've seen it many times
you will never be the same
you see everyone and everything in a whole new way

may we be seized by grace and peace
and may our love for Christ and others
abound more and more in knowledge, depth and insight

grace and peace is leading us into the new way
into the new creation that God inaugurated in Christ Jesus

I grew up in the old way
The way of condemnation
Where we enter into this endless internal dialogue
Telling us that we're not good enough
That we haven't proven ourselves
That we aren't pretty enough
Working hard enough

Oh and how about this one
Our sins are simply too grave to be reconciled or redeemed
That we are too heavy, too old, too slow, too stupid,
Too damaged
Too weak to be capable of change

I have an entire collection of these old tapes; how about you?

Those my friends are the old songs
We've been down that road
We've played that game
That's the old story – and that is the story that we are leaving behind

In Paul's letter to his friends in Philippi
he kept inviting us to live into a new Phronesis –
a new pattern of thinking, acting, and feeling.
A Christ pattern; which always begins with grace and peace

Grace is gift! Which is of course many things
It's the love of the father
The gift of his son, Jesus
And the gentle blowing whisper of the Spirit which reminds us that even in the most
hopeless of moments
You're going to be ok!!!!!!

It's seeing a picture of a friend's new baby posted on facebook

Realizing that even in this;
God was able to bring something beautiful into the world
Through a very twisted story
Oh grace

It's that woman sitting all alone
Tears in her eyes
Obviously struggling with some deeply personal pain
And her friend shows up
and simply surrounds her with her presence
No words; just presence
She soaks her in as if she is the very presence of Jesus
in that moment

And once again; she learns about grace and peace
Because God shows up often –
and many times he ends up looking a lot like you

It's that person who always lived with this need to judge others
Who has this compulsion to put everybody around them
in one of their categories
Always looking for what's wrong with that person
What they don't get
What they don't do
How they don't measure up

And then they themselves hit the wall
And realize that it's not working anymore
They quickly see that
all that energy condemning and measuring
And analyzing others
was just a way for them to avoid the spotlight on themselves

Because let's be honest my friends
That would be terrifying

But recently they encountered grace and peace
and they're becoming free to embrace the stranger,
the one they would have kept at a distance.
They are learning to accept things as they are
because they're learning that God accepts them
exactly as they are

Oh; grace and peace

Our world has a hard time with grace

We are invited to dinner and immediately we feel like we have to have them over and if we don't do it soon we start to feel guilty because we assume that their gift has to be reciprocated and when we run into them several months later we say "oh I feel so bad we've been meaning to have you over....."

That's guilt; not grace
That's transaction; grace transcends transaction
Grace is Trinitarian – it's the cosmic dance
between the father; the son and the holy spirit

We can't tell who's giving to who
Because the Trinitarian way of living
is completely saturated in grace

The invitation to dinner was all of grace
The meal they served you that night;
was meant to serve you and Christ

It was a gift! Gift; Gift; and again I say Gift!

Your job is simply to receive and enjoy
Why is that so hard?

It's easy to give. We like the power and strength.
We like having our hand on the wheel but receiving,
just receiving, without doing anything, not because of anything we've done but just
because the other person decided to give.

That's hard
It makes us feel helpless, powerless

Let's not get too radical about grace
Because if we do then things are going to get out of control
And this place we call Edgewater might start attracting 'outsiders'

You've got to earn your keep
You've got to study hard; exert yourself
Because that's my friends is how the world works
And over time; we've actually convinced ourselves
that this is how the universe works

God plays by the same rules; right?

But then we are beautifully confronted by the gospel,
by this Jesus who just walks up to people and says,
'your sins are forgiven.'

And I'm talking about those really sinful people
You know the ones; right?

He just walks up and shows us what God is like
He stands in front of the line where everybody
is lined up to throw stones at this woman
who is clearly out of God's community; God's family

an outsider!

And he says, 'go ahead – the one whose sin is less than hers –
go ahead and throw the stone

All of sudden everyone in the line remembers
that they have somewhere else to be

Immediately our eyes are drawn to the naked Christ
on the cross, thirsty, suffering, saying to his father
Forgive them – and we quickly see ourselves in the 'them'

we are 'them'

We find this resurrected Christ
going to his disciples after they betrayed and left him
Making this announcement to them
'All authority has been given to me'

What does that mean?

Something in the cosmos has shifted
The universe itself has tilted
And history will never be the same
Our history will never be the same

This grace that comes from our resurrected King
Is now able to sneak into our homes and secret rooms where guilt and shame are
piled up into every nook and cranny
There's barely any room for anything else these days

This room is full of guilt and shame
This room is full of self-loathing, hate and despair

Grace lights a match and the whole thing goes up in flame

And so we read this prison letter from Paul
who is on death row
He's facing a possible execution
He's an enemy of the state, a political prisoner
And this Paul; keeps using these absurd words
Joy; gift; beauty; hope; grace; rejoice; peace.....
This really is disturbing if you are listening!

Death row is not where you use these kinds of words
But Paul keeps insisting right in the face of the absurd
That suffering and joy are good friends;
dance partners; they hold each other
And then.....to top it off.....they kiss!

Is this Wisdom? Oh no; this actually transcends wisdom
This is the wisdom that actually comes after wisdom
This is the wisdom that actually leads us
to the secret of being content

Because it seems like
You're either happy because
everything is going according to plan

Or you're suffering because God did something horrible to you and messed with
your plan
and now you have car accidents
and cancer and the economy of divorce

It's one or the other
But not both
And certainly not both sleeping in the same bed

But in Philippians.....
Paul challenges us to engage in the suffering,
Lean into the challenges and possibilities of our day
with passion, conviction, and of course...joy.

How? Why?

Because, God's new creation actually works different

We discovered that in the midst of all the cracked pavement there are these
beautiful flowers that keep sprouting up
Right there; smack dab in the middle of that ugly mess

And that's what makes them so beautiful
Because if the pavement was in order
And the boundaries were clear and concise

We would just walk by the beauty everyday

To me.....this is one of Paul's best letters
I wonder if letters from prison
actually have a different flare to them

Some of the best paintings, songs, poems, stories
have come out of suffering

They've come from some kind of deep longing
Just when you think the story is over
something sprouts up out of the cracks and brings us home

Paul said; even in the midst of all the cracks; I'm ok

Contentment is learning how to perceive things
that run counter to prevailing wisdom
about how the world works

It's waking up to the evidence of a particular kind of formation that Christ is
working and through us

My beloved friends

You really can become a certain kind of person in this world
This one.....the one we live in here and now
Not just the one that hasn't arrived yet

I believe in you all
You can become the kinds of people who actually live
in the Christ Pattern

I believe that we can actually work out our salvation together with fear and trembling

It's possible to see your story; your life in a whole new way
Through Christ
Through his life, death and resurrection

That's the message of this letter written thousands of years ago
And it's the same message
that I have given to you for the last 6 months

We can become; and I realize it's going to take time;
but nonetheless we can become the kind of people
who aren't completely crushed by circumstances

That when tragedy, failure, regrets and disappointments come
We will be able to say, even in this.....there will be some kind of resurrection

We are becoming a people who don't grumble or complain
Because now we have a larger perspective
We are realizing that we are part of a bigger story

Why? We have decided to ground ourselves in grace and peace

We are kind,
we don't rush to judge situations
because we know that surprises are often just around the corner and God isn't done with us yet

We don't blow our fuse,
We don't fly off the handle
We don't even react at the slightest inconvenience

We step back in the moment; breathe deeply;
realizing once again
That these things don't have the final word
Because we are learning how to see our past,
present, and future through Christ

Everything you've been through
is now being retold through Christ

Somehow Christ was able to take all those things;
those broken fragments from our past
and build a table out of them

The table of grace and peace where we come each week to remind ourselves that
Christ has the final word

And because of that we can now say
Rejoice; rejoice and again I say rejoice
Because now we know; that grace is a gift!

Oh my friends
Anxiety happens; it rises up; it's part of our human experience
If fact; if you don't experience anxiety you may want to check your pulse

But even in this.....
anxiety doesn't have the final word

We don't always have to live on the edge of our seats
We don't have to keep spinning
and making up new things to worry about
Or creating stories that aren't real

Or continuing the tell the same old tired story
The story full of
The if onlies.....
The what ifs.....
The should haves.....
The could haves.....

You can actually take on the Christ Pattern of
thinking, acting and feeling

Because the same creative energy that unleashed the universe has been unleashed
in you; you are going to be fine

Think about how Paul ends his letter to the Philippians –
by writing “all the Lord's people here send you greetings, especially those who
belong to Caesar's household”
wait.....

do you realize what he is doing here?

Paul is in Caesar's prison because he doesn't buy the
'Caesar is Lord propaganda'
But while he's been in prison
he's been telling Caesar's employees
about the resurrected Christ

and some of them believe they've become followers

Now.....if you work for Caesar and receive a paycheck from Caesar and belong to Caesar's household – how do you explain to Caesar that you've now become a follower of Jesus 'who is Lord' because of the witness of this man Paul who is about to be executed by Caesar because he keeps insisting that Jesus is Lord?

Has your job ever put you in morally ambiguous situations where you're not quite sure what the right thing to do is? Well.....you aren't the first

I think Paul adds this little
'especially those who belong to Caesar's household'
detail at the end just to let us know that

Jesus movement is taking off inside the walls of power

He wants us to know that even if he dies
the message will live on
He wants his Philippian friends to know that there are others in very tenuous, risky,
dangerous situations who are also trying to figure out what it means to follow Jesus

at one point in his letter he quotes
an early Christ hymn about Jesus
who is executed on the cross but then exalted by God
Do you remember what we learned?

We learned that the last word has not yet been spoken
The worst word that could be spoken of a person – cross – was followed by the best
word that could be spoken over a person – exalted

Pain is not the last word
Humiliation is not the last word
Suffering is not the last word

Aids, hunger, homelessness, suicide, child soldiers,
.....not the last word

Even greedy executives do not have the last word

Abuse, loneliness, and divorce
The last word has not yet been spoken

Never forget this my dear friends
The resurrection has turned everything upside down

all sorts of possibilities have now opened up

It actually invites all kinds of people to the celebration
as it announces that the last word has not been spoken

So until then
In our fear and trembling;
In our doubting and rejoicing
Forgiving and being forgiven
Our giving and our receiving

We have an open tomb, a new creation,
and the heightened anticipation that there is more to be said....

I'm sad to say that our journey through Philippians
has come to a close
But like all good endings
It's really just the beginning

I can't wait to see what's next.....

My deepest longing; my greatest desire
Is for all of you; my beloved community
To know
To understand
To live
To experience
To enjoy
Grace and Peace

Communion.....

The table built out of the broken fragments
And where we truly encounter grace
The place where all are welcome
The table where we are once again reminded
That Christ has the final word