

Reflections
for a
Year of
Grace



Sufficient



Northern Illinois Conference
The United Methodist Church



FOREWORD

At our Annual Conference session in 2024, Bishop Schwerin suggested that “what we pay attention to grows.” Along with a call to innovation and experimentation, he offered the suggestion to make 2025 a “Year of Grace”, in which the people of the Northern Illinois Conference might grow in our recognition, understanding, and experience of God’s grace and be enlarged in our capacities to receive and share it with others in our communities. In a column at the end of 2024, Bishop Dan wrote “Grace is the unmerited, upbuilding, unconditional love God extends to all people and to the whole creation. United Methodists have an expansive view of grace. We know that grace is always among us, working in love.”

In 2020, as folks worked to navigate the challenges of the early days of the pandemic, laity and clergy from Northern Illinois put together a resource of prayer and reflection entitled “Times Like These”. Organized by the co-chairs of the Discipleship Task Force, Rev. Caleb Hong and Karen Bonnell, a booklet was printed and distributed and can still be found online at the Annual Conference website (umcnic.org). Inspired by that work and acknowledging that the call to experimentation will require grace from God and toward each other, the Northern Illinois Conference Committee on Discipleship and Spiritual Formation have assembled this small booklet with Scripture, reflections, and prayers, as a resource to support and encourage folks to grow in grace and the love of Jesus Christ. We pray that it is a blessing to your walk of faith.

In Christ,

The Members of the Committee on Discipleship and Spiritual Formation

*It is by trusting in
the gift of his great
kindness that we have
been made whole.*

Ephesians 2:8
FIRST NATIONS VERSION

If you have ever crossed paths with the recovery community, you may have heard this adage: 'we are all recovering from something.' Recovery communities are trying to help set aside the shame that comes with addiction by reframing that we are all in recovery. Eating. Not eating. Drinking. Pride because you are not drinking. We recover from having too many of the wrong chemicals in the brain or not enough of the right chemicals. My recovery is no better than yours, but the fact that we share means we can help each other know grace for the way. Regardless of your recovery, grace will be what makes you whole.

Thomas Merton named sin as a deep alienation that separates us. Racism is one expression of our alienation. Domination of the environment leads to another. Make your own list, but for John Wesley, we are all recovering from sin.

Enter the power of grace stage left. I love Wesleyan theology because it is centered in grace, grace for our broken relationship with God, and each other. Grace enough to grow for our whole lives. I love this First Nations version of Eph. 2:8. Trusting in the gift of grace is the road to wholeness. It is so much better not to travel alone. Help me travel, will you? I need grace.

We are all in process.



BISHOP DAN SCHWERIN

NORTHERN ILLINOIS-WISCONSIN EPISCOPAL AREA

*Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for
thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*

Hebrews 13:2, KJV

My favorite kinds of grace moments are the unexpected or surprising kind. I've been keeping a "delight diary" for about a year-and-a-half now where I only write a few words of something that delighted me that day. As I look back on those daily delights, I think they can almost always be considered grace moments.

I was riding the CTA Orange Line train early one morning to Midway a few weeks ago. Having lived in the city now for 16 years, I have a pretty good sense of how a train ride will go, but it's not unusual for something surprising to happen. I was closing my eyes for a quick cat nap when I heard a voice that surprised me. It was the train conductor. Ninety-nine percent of the time when the conductor's voice comes on, it's either talking about a delay or chastising a rider for blocking a door. On this day, however,

the conductor started sharing various information. She first talked about the weather forecast that day and then she said, "I know life can be challenging sometimes, but just remember, you can do this. You're going to have a blessed day." I was taken aback. Conductors never talk like this, but it gave me a lift to my day. Yes, life can be challenging, but I got this! It was the perfect definition of grace: surprising, unexpected, undeserving, renewing.

When the train came to the Midway stop and the end of the line, I made sure to thank her and she smiled and said, "You're welcome." Hebrews encourages us to welcome and entertain "angels unawares" in our midst. It's a good practice to think about how we might show hospitality to an unexpected angel in our homes, but I pray we have the grace to welcome those surprising angels into our hearts, too.

Surprising God,

Thank you for gracious and surprising angels
that come into our lives. Open our hearts that we might welcome
them graciously knowing that we are welcoming you as well.

Amen.

PRAYER

REV. CHRISTIAN COON

NIC DIRECTOR OF CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REDEVELOPMENT

*Rejoice always. Pray continually.
Give thanks in every situation because
this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

I love Paul's message to the Thessalonians. It inspires us to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances, especially during times of turmoil.

Our joy, as Paul reminds us, comes not from our circumstances but from our relationship with Jesus. Rejoicing always is not easy, especially when life feels uncertain or overwhelming. Yet, Paul urges us to center our joy in the Lord. This perspective reminds us of that God's presence and promises to remain constant, even when life does not.

We are also reminded about the importance of prayer as a constant spiritual discipline. Paul and his companions prayed regularly and valued the prayers of the community. Prayer is not reserved for private moments; it is a shared act of faith and intercession.

Giving thanks always is not dependent on our situation but is grounded in Christ. Thankfulness fosters unity, strengthens relationships, and reminds us that we are all part of something greater than ourselves. A spirit of gratitude can be contagious, inspiring others to recognize and celebrate God's work in their lives and in the lives of those around them.

"Rejoice, pray, and give thanks" is more than a command, it is a way of life for disciples of Christ. In these challenging times, we are still called to live with gratitude. God's grace meets us where we are, restoring, renewing, and reminding us that His love is enough. Let our lives be a reflection of God's grace, and be a light that brings hope, encouragement, and love to a world in need.

Gracious God,

Thank you for your constant presence in our lives. In every season, whether joyful or challenging, you remain faithful. Teach us to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing, and to give thanks in all things. Strengthen our hearts when we feel weary and remind us that our joy is found in You alone. Fill us with Your grace, that we may live as reflections of Your love, hope, and peace. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

REV. FABIOLA GRANDON-MAYER
DIRECTOR OF CONNECTIONAL MINISTRIES

*Jesus replied, "Simon, I have
something to say to you."
"Teacher, speak," he said.*

Luke 7:40

PRAYER

Our gracious Father in heaven,
Thank you for helping me to see
how Jesus loved your beloved
children. Jesus didn't come to
the well for the water; He came
for me. I am so grateful that you
have helped me to see how much
you want us to recognize you for
our creator and the love for each
one of us. I pray that as I ask
for forgiveness every day, that I
will pass that love on to others
needing to be healed. It is in your
Son's blessed name I ask.


Amen.

In Luke 7:40-43, Jesus tells Simon the Pharisee a parable about two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii and the other fifty. When neither could pay their debt, the lender forgave both. Jesus asks Simon which debtor would love the lender more, to which Simon replies, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." Jesus affirms Simon's judgment.

This year of grace has spoken to me in learning the understanding and acceptance of God's grace. I was able to internalize asking Jesus to come into my heart, to invite me into His kingdom, and learn about His basic instructions before leaving earth. I was not able to internalize the acceptance of how this grace applied to me. I still carried the burden of guilt from my past and present sins. It was like there was a film stuck to my soul.

I continued to read the scriptures in the book of Luke through Lent and prayed differently about how much Jesus needed his disciples to grow in their faith. He needed them to be there praying and keeping watch while learning to be His disciples. He needed their hands, feet, hearts and commitment to go forward. While internalizing their weaknesses and mistakes I clearly saw how forgiving and patient He was while teaching and nurturing everyone he met. It hit me! I also have this forgiveness through grace because of His willingness to be sacrificed for me.

KATHERINE HOWELL
HARMONY UMC



*So God blessed the seventh day
and hallowed it, because on it
God rested from all the work
that he had done in creation.*

Genesis 2:3

PRAYER

Gracious God,

Thank you for inviting us to live
in your rhythm of work and rest.
Help us to embrace the pauses not
as empty spaces to fill but as holy
ground where your grace restores
us. Let each moment of stillness
become a sanctuary where our Spirit
breathes life into our hearts. Teach us
to dwell in the grace in-between—in
the Sabbath, in the silence, in the
hidden spaces where healing begins,
and in the rest that restores our
souls. We offer you our work and our
rest, our striving and our surrender,
trusting that all of it belongs to you.
Through Christ, our Companion in
both labor and stillness,
Amen.

Lately, I've started doing a 4-3 interval workout on the treadmill at my fitness center. The preset program puts me on an incline or higher speed for 4 minutes, then shifts me to a relaxed pace for 3 minutes. I've come to appreciate this rhythm of exertion and ease. I've learned that this alternating pattern builds greater strength and endurance than simply pushing through at full speed. The rest after the push is not wasted time—it's holy space. It's a grace in-between.

As children of God, we too are shaped by such rhythms: work and rest, movement and stillness, creation and cessation. Our Creator God models this divine rhythm. At the beginning of Scripture, we see God creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh --not because God was weary, but because rest completes the sacred pattern. The Hebrew word Shabbat means "to cease," "to stop," "to rest." It invites us to trust that stepping away is not neglecting life but entering more fully into its wholeness.

This grace-filled rhythm of Sabbath finds its way into our lives in many forms—whether it's a 4-3 workout, a weekend after a long workweek, or a sabbatical after years of ministry or service. Yet the biblical Sabbath goes

even further. It's not merely a break. It is a radical act of trust. A holy interruption. A sacred "no" in a world obsessed with more. It reminds us that we are not machines, but beloved human beings, sustained not by our output, but by God's grace.

This divine rhythm echoes across time: six years of labor followed by a sabbatical year; seven cycles of seven years followed by the jubilee -- a year of release and restoration. Slaves are freed. Debts forgiven. Land left to breathe. Animals, too, are given rest. It is a vision of justice and mercy, rooted in grace-filled pauses.

In our fast-paced, productivity-driven culture, where constant motion is praised and slowing down can feel like failure, the call to rest is deeply countercultural. But it's precisely in those in-between moments—the quiet pauses, the time set apart—that God also meets us. There, in the stillness, we find grace. There, we're reminded that we are more than what we produce. And we find the strength to continue, not by pushing harder, but by receiving the grace that sustains us in every in-between.

Thanks be to God for the grace in-between.

REV. HWA-YOUNG CHONG
PRAIRIE NORTH DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

*Your beauty and love chase
after me every day of my life.*

Psalm 23:6a, The Message
by Eugene Peterson

I had an early flight out of Washington, D.C., back to Chicagoland. Since I was returning a rental car, I left plenty of time to allow for a wrong turn or two. As I pulled into the garage, an Alamo agent waved me in, and I pulled up behind another car. A sign above me was helpful: Do you have your purse? wallet? phone? luggage? I checked the backseat and trunk one last time, then headed down the walkway towards the terminal.

As I neared the elevator, I heard someone behind me yelling. Wow, I thought, that is loud. Wonder what's going on? I looked behind me—was someone injured? The shouts kept coming...ma'am! Ma'am! Ma'am! I kept walking. Ma'am! Ma'am! Ma'am! "Is he talking to me?" I said to the guy next to me, and I turned around to see this gentleman waving his arms, running toward me at a full sprint, almost out of breath.

"You forgot to leave your keys!", he panted. My heart sank as I reached into my purse and sheepishly pulled out the very thing I was supposed to leave

behind. Another agent, witnessing this scene, just looked at me and shook his head, "This man just saved you \$600!" I was embarrassed, of course. But also tremendously relieved.

This man saved me! He didn't HAVE to chase after me, he didn't HAVE to shout across the parking garage to get me to stop walking, he didn't HAVE to try to find me at all. BUT HE DID.

He went out of his way to run after me. As I walked to the elevator, sans keys this time, I found myself singing the chorus of that beautiful Cece Winans praise song: "Your goodness is running after, it keeps running after me."

That day, in an airport rental car garage, God's love chased after me in the guise of a kind and gracious rental car agent. I wonder where God will show up next?

PRAYER

God of pursuit,

Give us grace to hear you
calling, and lead us to be
your means of salvation for
all who are lost.

Amen.

*And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that
in all things at all times, having all that you need,
you will abound in every good work.*

2 Corinthians 9:8

I asked and you answered.

I asked and believed in you and not
myself.

You appeared within all of my senses.

I remembered that your eye is on the
sparrow with the knowledge that you
are watching me.

You revealed yourself in every way, If I
would seek you

You revealed yourself in laughter and
playfulness

You smiled when I surrendered

You comforted me

You are glorified when I tell of your
promises

You declared to me that in your Word
that you have plans for me to prosper
and not harm and plans to give me
hope and a future in the midst of the
storm.

Gracious God I am grateful for all the
gifts I received because you love me.

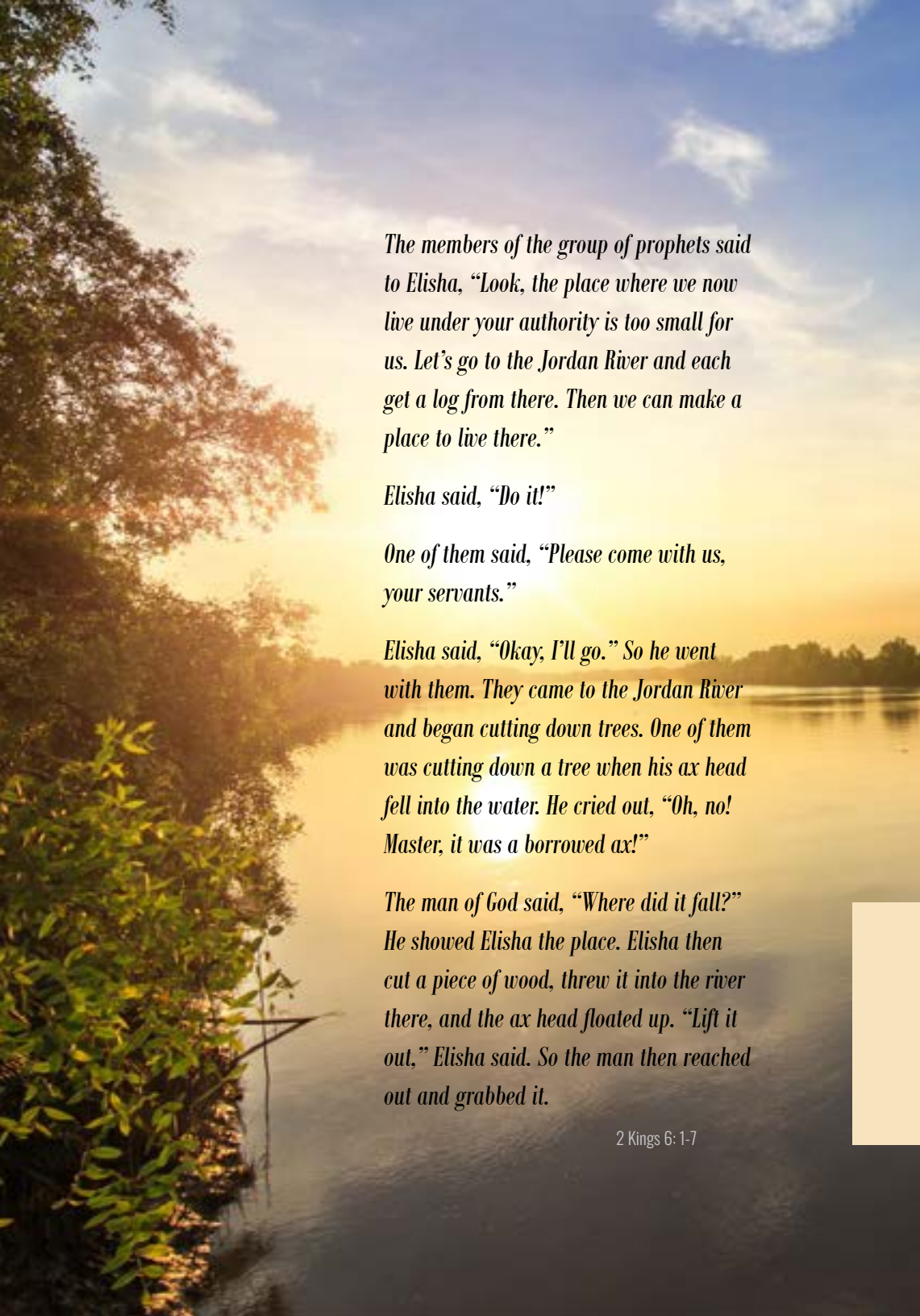
For it is your grace that carries me all
my days.

DIANA DAVIS

FIRST CHURCH CHICAGO TEMPLE

REV. WENDY HARDIN HERMANN

PRAIRIE CENTRAL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT



The members of the group of prophets said to Elisha, “Look, the place where we now live under your authority is too small for us. Let’s go to the Jordan River and each get a log from there. Then we can make a place to live there.”

Elisha said, “Do it!”

One of them said, “Please come with us, your servants.”

Elisha said, “Okay, I’ll go.” So he went with them. They came to the Jordan River and began cutting down trees. One of them was cutting down a tree when his ax head fell into the water. He cried out, “Oh, no! Master, it was a borrowed ax!”

The man of God said, “Where did it fall?” He showed Elisha the place. Elisha then cut a piece of wood, threw it into the river there, and the ax head floated up. “Lift it out,” Elisha said. So the man then reached out and grabbed it.

2 Kings 6: 1-7

In this Biblical story, Elisha gives permission for the prophets to build a new and larger base of operations. While building this new headquarters, a prophet drops a borrowed iron ax head into the water. Elisha eases the distress of the clumsy prophet by causing the ax head to float.

Now you may be sitting there wondering “What does a floating axe head have to do with grace?” It may seem like an inconsequential thing but, in 950 BCE, an iron ax head was an important thing. Iron tools were rare and expensive because iron was still cutting-edge technology at this time. Losing this ax head meant a lot of trouble for the poor prophet with slippery fingers... not to mention it would have delayed or ended their building project.

Have you ever been a part of a ministry at your church that was starting to gain success and been afraid to contribute or get involved because you didn't want to “mess up” or “fumble the ball?” Have you ever been at a church meeting when discussing something new and people said, “we’ve never done

it that way before,” or, “we tried that once before and it didn’t go so well”?

I think this story is included in the Bible, not to highlight Elisha’s building skills, but to remind us that God is able to help us even when we make mistakes. Through God’s grace, our mistakes will never stop the mission and ministry of God in this world. Rather than allowing the fear of “fumbling the axe head” to paralyze us from taking action in our communities, we should build the ministries and relationships God is calling us to build. Starting new ministries in new ways trusting that, when we do make mistakes, God’s grace will show up and cause even what we drop to rise to the surface and allow the work of the church to continue. Do not allow mistakes or even past failures to stop you from finding new ways to share God’s love in the world. Rather, let them become your sacred stories of Grace, trusting that God will show up and make the impossible possible, and create new ways that you can love in God’s name.

PRAYER

God of Grace,

Thank you for being with us throughout the whole of our lives. When we make mistakes, let projects drop, or feel like we are not skilled enough to get the job done, send to us an Elisha that will help what seems impossible become possible. Allow us to continue the work that you have called us to do as a church and individuals. In Jesus’ name we pray.

Amen.

REV. DR. BRIAN GILBERT
PRAIRIE SOUTH DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined — and everyone undergoes discipline — then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all...

Hebrews 12:7-8 (NIV)

When I was young, I used to see pastors standing at the church doors after worship, shaking hands with big smiles. My childhood memories of church are full of joy—playing with friends, learning from youth pastors, going on mission trips. Back then, I believed that ministry was simply that: warm handshakes and happy faces. Ministry looked easy. Everything seemed bright and beautiful.

After I entered ministry myself, it didn't take long to realize how difficult it can be. In one particularly challenging season, I found myself dreading going to church for the first time in my life. The pressure felt so heavy it was like a weight pressing on my shoulders.

Gracious God,

Help us to lean on You in times of trial, trusting that Your grace is at work—even through hardship—producing in us a harvest of righteousness and peace. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

I still remember how that felt—and honestly, I'd rather not.

In response to our Bishop's call for 2025 to be a "Year of Grace," I have been following the M'Cheyne Bible Reading Plan, reading four chapters a day. One day, a passage from Hebrews struck me deeply. It helped me see that hardship and discipline are two sides of the same coin. They are not signs of abandonment, but rather the most vivid evidence that our God—our loving Parent—is actively shaping and teaching us. Verse 11 especially stayed with me: "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace..."

What if our painful seasons are actually the grace of God at work in us—training, refining, and preparing us for a harvest we cannot yet see?

Dear friends in the Northern Illinois Conference, we are in this together. And through it all, we remain God's beloved children. The tough times you are facing may, in fact, be holy signs of God's grace and love in your life.

REV. HEEWON KIM

OUR SAVIOR'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, SCHAUMBURG, IL

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:19-20

It is amazing to me that God wants disciples. God could be off enjoying creation—the beautiful waterfalls, the breathtaking mountain heights, the giant sequoias, a calf released from the barn kicking up his heels, the salt spray while watching sandpipers skittering about on the beach! Those things are much less messy than human beings. Not to mention less heartbreaking. But we are his masterpiece! We are intended to commune with God in a way that the other creations can't.

Because of this, God spares no price to lovingly and gently call us back from our god-searching ways. I found out that God speaks to us in many ways, some of them so subtle we miss them, especially the more supernatural ways. Oh, it takes practice. We don't always get it right. But God is patient. God speaks lovingly even if sometimes it shows up as God afflicting the comfortable. Of course, we cannot do this by ourselves. In the with-God life, we are transformed into the people God created us to be.

PRAYER

Oh, God,

Open my eyes and ears to your gracious invitation to live my life with you.

Amen.

KAREN BONNELL
STEWART UMC

You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed.

Ephesians 2:8 (CEB)

PRAYER

O God our Deliverer,

We give you thanks for our salvation, not because of who we are, but because of who you are. Empower us by your Holy Spirit to be courageous witnesses to your grace and mercy.

Amen.

The need for God's divine grace reminds me of my accident on January 7, 2024, at 7 p.m. on I-94 East. God's divine grace is the reason I am alive today. I had a terrible accident that almost tore my life apart. I should have died. Instead, an ambulance picked me up immediately and took me to a hospital. It was God's grace that saved my life. I have come to believe that we all need God's divine grace.

Living in God's grace means living with the awareness and acceptance that you are loved, forgiven, and sustained by God—not because you've earned it, but because of who God is. It's about recognizing that your relationship with God is not based on perfection or performance, but on God's unmerited favor and mercy.

When I reflect on the grace of God, I am convinced that God's grace is not merely something we receive but also something we are called to embody. Scripture teaches that just as we have been shown grace through Christ, we are likewise expected to extend that same grace to others. Therefore, as followers of Jesus, we are called to actively practice and demonstrate grace toward our neighbors by putting these principles into action:

- ◆ Receiving forgiveness freely and not being weighed down by guilt or shame.
- ◆ Living in freedom, not bound by fear, legalism, or the need to prove your worth.
- ◆ Extending grace to others because you've experienced it yourself.
- ◆ Growing in love, knowing that God's grace empowers transformation, not just covers sin.
- ◆ Trusting that God is with you, even in your weakness, struggles, or failures.

REV. G. MORRIS K. JARKLOH JR.
FIRST UMC LANSING

My Grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

2 Corinthians 12:9 (NIV)

We all face handicaps and challenges in life. More often than not, we allow these weaknesses to sabotage our mindset, making us feel as though we are not enough or undeserving. Yet, in 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul testifies that God's grace is sufficient. Even though he had "thorns in the flesh"—a weakness, an insurmountable challenge—he declared that God's grace is enough. It is in our weakness that God's power is made perfect.

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God,
Thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, whom You sent to dwell among us. Through His incarnation, He understands the pain and challenges we face. Help us, dear Lord, to lean fully on Your grace. Thank you that Your grace is more than enough for those who seek it, and abundantly sufficient for those who receive it.
Amen.

Reflecting on this, I realize that, yes, we are struggling, and yes, we are facing many challenges. But if we truly grasp the power in our hands—the grace of God—then, like Paul, we can boast in our challenges and weaknesses. We can appreciate them, knowing that Christ's strength is moving in and through us, at work in our lives.

The same truth applies to the church. We must recognize that we need God's grace to effectively do His work. We need His sustaining grace, especially when obstacles seem to surround us. Leaning on God's grace means allowing His ability to work in us, through us, and on our behalf. And His grace is more than enough.

Can we measure the fullness of God's grace? Of course not—it's immeasurable. As Psalm 103 says, "As far as the east is from the west," so great is His love for us. Christ's grace flows without limit. In fact, it is new every morning. God's grace is so abundant that we can never contain it for ourselves; it's meant to overflow. It must flow through us, and it's compelling that we share it with others, especially those in need.

REV. VICTOR MELAD
LAKE NORTH DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

I act weak to the weak, so I can recruit the weak. I have become all things to all people, so I could save some by all possible means.

1 Corinthians 9:22 (CEB)

My wife Renée loves horses. I knew soon after meeting her that horses would be a part of our life together. Of course, this means that dirt, manure, horsehair, and little pieces of hay in uncomfortable places are part of my life. And caring for animals is an everyday thing, whether the weather is nice or terrible and regardless of how tired or busy or sick you are, or what sort of mood you're in.

This past January, we had made our daily afternoon trip to the barn, feeding the horses their supplements and medication, filling their water, setting out hay, and dealing with manure. Standing next to the car with an itchy ankle from the usual hay in my muck boots, I was impatient to head home and, biting back a scold, I headed back uphill towards the pasture where Renée was standing, to hurry her along. She turned, and I was suddenly struck by her joy, the beauty of an inner light that flowed from love. It reminded me of my love for her, and suddenly every part of the work was infused with joy. This is the power of Divine love, that can transform even mud and manure into a means of grace.

God of transformation,

You meet us in sacraments and scriptures and sometimes show up in surprising places and ways. Help us to begin with gratitude and learn to recognize your grace in our lives. Loving boldly, serving joyfully, and leading courageously, make us means of grace for others, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

REV. SEAMUS ENRIGHT
FIRST UMC OTTAWA

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

2025 Bishop's Recommended Reading List

Gardens in the Desert

MICHEAL ADAM BECK & KENNETH H. CARTER JR.

Wesleyan Vile-tality

ASHLEY BOGGAN

On Love

PAUL W. & JANET K. CHILCOTE

Out of Every Tribe & Nation

JUSTO L. GONZALEZ

I'm Black. I'm Christian. I'm Methodist

EDITED BY REV. RUDY RASMUS

From our Conference Website

Stronger Together: Practical Steps Toward Observing A Year of Grace

<https://www.umcnic.org/news/stronger-together-practical-steps-toward-observing-a-year-of-grace>

From the Bishop: Can 2025 Be A Year of Grace

<https://www.umcnic.org/news/from-the-bishop-can-2025-be-a-year-of-grace>

Reimagining Church: Double Ashing, Double Grace

<https://www.umcnic.org/news/reimagining-church-double-ashing-double-grace>

Discipleship Ministries

Grace

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/content-library/tags/grace>

For more preaching and teaching ideas and resources for a "Year of Grace" or to share something that worked for you, email seamus.enright@att.net