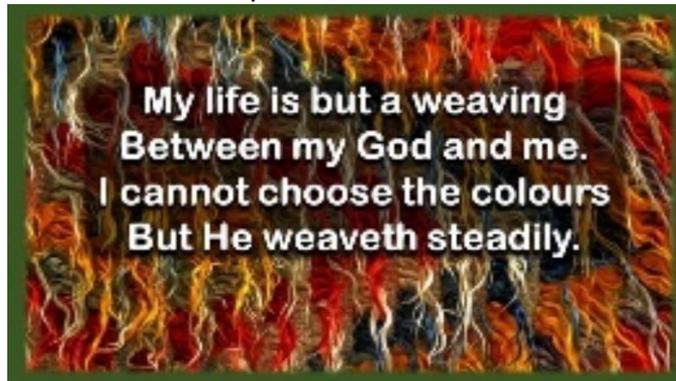


I have to say I've been really looking forward to this series where we explore and celebrate how God's story is continually weaving its way through all our stories. It's what scripture actually reveals to us the most.

What I really want to celebrate today is what I call the **grace moments**. Kim and I have so many takeaways from our 5-week UK trip, but this is the central one. That every day in the so-called ordinary workings of life God is weaving Grace filled moments into our lives. Its why I've chosen this as my central image. A beautiful tapestry of weaving.

I think every single one of us recognises, that **IF** we are attentive enough, we can see these threads of grace, God colours, woven into the tapestry of our lives. In the poignant, the passionate and the painful. But always turning them into something precious. Every day I believe, we are graced by the presence of God's Grace.

I like these words from Corrie Ten Boom's poem:



**My life is but a weaving - Between my God and me.  
I cannot choose the colours - But He weaveth steadily.**

As I said, the reason these words resonate so strongly is because of the 5-week journey we've just been through in the UK. Kim and I both felt a palpable sense of God's presence throughout. Grace moments seemed to abound and so many times when it was most needed God's grace was always sufficient. On a personal level, I feel as if I've just experienced the most profound chapter of my whole life story.

But I want to start with a short video of one such grace moment from our own community that took place on Thursday. The ESOL community who have been so hit by Covid are still faithfully gathering on Tuesdays and Thursday.

They are served by faithful people from our St George's community. Two of these people David Woods and Peter Allfrey celebrated birthdays this week and the good people of ESOL wanted to honour them. And we caught it on video.

#### SHOW VIDEO



See this for me is God's tapestry of Grace at work. Peter, David has their own stories, and all the people of the ESOL community (mostly from China) have their own stories. And now through the kingdom work of ESOL all of their lives have been caught up in this tapestry of God's story. God the master weaver taking all the strands, and all the threads of all our lives to create a tapestry of Grace.

But let's start this whole series with a foundational piece of scripture that defines WHY ALL our stories are inextricably and intimately caught up in God's story. It cannot be any other way.



In Genesis 1:26 ...Then God said, “**Let US make human beings in OUR image, to be like US.**” Now do any of us truly grasp the full enormity and significance of these words for every expression of our lives? Because this is the truly beautiful revelation of scripture that shows us that you and I are **created** to be part of this divine relationship with our Triune God. So your story and my story are by very definition woven into God's Eternal story. In all the small details of our lives our stories are shaped and formed by this sacred relational truth. For me, what scripture really reveals to us, is that Grace is the central theme running through all of scripture and God's story.

Show me one character in the bible whose stories get caught up in God's redeeming story who was NOT touched and changed by the gift of Grace. **Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Ruth, Mary, Elizabeth, Paul** and so many more. All of them are ordinary, fallible, vulnerable human beings just like you and me. All with different stories. And all of them are touched by the Grace of God and all of them become part of this sacred tapestry.



The interesting thing about a tapestry is that on the front we see the beautiful picture that tells a story woven at the hands of a skilled weaver. But the back part is full of knots, loose ends, and messy coloured threads, all lacking clarity and form.

**Isn't this the image of God the master weaver at work in the messy knots and loose ends of our lives?**

- How often have you struggled to see how the painful knotty messy times are part of anything that makes sense? Let alone a beautiful tapestry.
- How often do we all have chapters in our lives that seem to have no rhyme or reason. It feels as if we are living in the back side of the tapestry.

But I guess this is why we call it 'faith'. We are called to trust and have faith, that God through the redeeming power of Grace, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is continually trying to weave and restore a tapestry of meaning, purpose and hope. A more beautiful humanity. A more beautiful world.

We are called to trust that God's so loves the world, so loves His tapestry of creation that God sends His only son to walk among us **full of grace and truth**. Not to condemn this tapestry but to save, heal and restore it. Because as John tells us... **16 From his fullness (Christ's Fullness) we have all received, grace upon grace.**

As I said, the trick of course is to notice this gift of Grace. So many things can distract and dull us to its presence. Which is why one of my favourite pieces of wisdom is by the late great Eugene Paterson. He of the Message translation who said this about being a pastor.

**“My job is not to solve people's problems or make them happy, but to help them see the grace operating their lives.”**

The real beauty of this deep wisdom is that this isn't just for pastors and priests. Its for all of us. Every one of us can help each other to see the gift of grace operating in our lives. This to me is what a church community is all about. **Isn't this the role of the Church?** To help people see how God's saving healing grace, through Christ and the Spirit, is at work in all our lives.

This truth was the most profound take away of our UK journey. There wasn't one day that we didn't see God's grace woven throughout all our experiences.



Just to have the privilege of going back to 73 Severne Rd house I grew up in, and where Mom and dad still live together after 70 years of marriage was sacred. It was incredibly evocative, poignant and life-enriching on so many levels.

To have the opportunity to spend precious time together with my Mum and Dad, after 4 long years away, in what I knew would be my last time, was as profound and beautiful as it gets.

As I was there, I was thinking how The Beatles once sang, **"Penny Lane is in my ears and in my eyes"**. It was their way of paying homage to just how much the streets of Liverpool is woven into their very being. Going back made me realise just how much **73 Severne Road is in my ears and in my eyes**. How much my Mum and my dad had formed the very core of who I am. God had taken their stories and woven it into my story, to shape me into the person I am today.

There's no doubt that this journey has got me praying and processing on the whole journey of my story, my life. And looking back on my Story, I see just HOW much God's grace has touched and transformed my life. My story is the story of the prodigal. I truly once was lost but then through God's amazing grace I was found. God's grace saved a wretch like me.

I think this is why I'm still so keenly aware of how grace continues to touch my life. **Grace upon Grace**. Even when my sin abounds, it seems God's grace abounds even more.

I think this is why when I discovered Jesus, I got so excited and compelled. For me, Jesus is Gods radical grace in sandals. Jesus is Grace in action. Think about it, what's at the heart of pretty much every parable? It's about the abundance of mercy, love and grace. 70 times 7. The full measure. Grace to the Samaritan and the lepers. The Father running to meet the lost son. Not resting until the one lost coin and the one lost sheep is safely found by the search party of Grace.

Even to people who would claim no faith, grace seems carry about it the aroma of something true, beautiful and good. Bono lead singer of the band U2 called 'grace ' the last untainted word in the English language.



Bono was so inspired by how grace had touched and changed his life that he wrote a song called Grace. **"Grace removes the stain, takes the blame. What once was hurt, what once was friction, what left a mark, no longer stings. Because Grace finds beauty, in everything"**

Author Anne Lamott puts it this way ... **“I do not understand the mystery of grace -- only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.”**

**So let's pause for moment and ponder all of those words.**

• Where has God's healing grace met you in your life.  
 • Where has Grace met you this past week in the small details of your lives?  
 • In your most vulnerable, fragile moments, where has God's grace been sufficient to help you catch breath?  
 • Helped to heal the sting of a hurt or a friction.  
 • Where can you give yourself gracious permission to forgive yourself. Gracious love keeps no record of wrongs and never fails to meet you where you are and take you to a more grace filled place.

- Where at this moment in your story do you need God's healing grace to meet you where you are?
- Where can God's grace be sufficient to help you catch breath? Keep the head just above water. To help to heal a sting or a friction.
- What has been a grace filled moment in this past week you can be grateful for?
- Where can you give yourself gracious permission to forgive your mistakes and lapses in judgment. Remember that God's Gracious unlimited love keeps no record of wrongs and never fails. Never fails to meet you where you are and take you to a more grace filled place.

I want to begin to conclude on a very personal note by sharing with you a clip of my Mum and Dad. It's probably one of the most treasured of all the Grace filled moments woven into our journey and it speaks to me of the deep truth of Genesis 1:26... ***Let us make humans in our image to be like us.***

Scripture tells us clearly, that the highest and most noble expression of our humanity that reflects the image of God, is when we are in the business of love. **The love we give, the love we've receive, and the love we share.** Honouring the sacredness of relationship. It's what our humanity is all about and ultimately, it's what all our stories are about.

But before I show the video it a little context.

Dad and Mum have been married for 70 years. Teenage sweethearts who were told that they were too young to marry. Dad was orphaned at 3 and has no recollection of his parents. He was brought up by his eldest sister in a family of 10 siblings in poor working-class Britain with very little education. When the war came, he was sent to Wales to protect him from the German bombing that blitzed Birmingham. What we didn't know until he and mom almost died in a car crash 20 years ago, is that these were times when Dad suffered terrible childhood abuse. The trauma of crash obviously ignited the trauma of his childhood, and he suffered a breakdown at 73 years of age.



Like Dad, mum grew up in the old Birmingham back to backs. Many families all in one backyard with houses backing onto each other and sharing the outdoor toilets with neighbours. You truly had to love your neighbour.

Mum was the eldest of 3 siblings. Her Dad was in the Salvation Army and led worship. But behind closed doors he was a violent drunk who eventually left them, and Mom became the main carer at the age of 12.



And here's a piece of God's gracious synchronicity. Mum would often go to the famous City centre Bullring fruit and veg market (still there to this day) to pick up the fruit and veg leftovers off the floor to take back to feed the family. This is the market that is right next to St Martin's Church (you can see it on the pic) and this is the very church where Kim and I came to faith and my ministry journey began. Grace weaving its way through the stories of our lives.

They married young and because of his sketchy education Dad could never really spell. We still have the letter Dad sent to Mom when he was conscripted into army that begins... "Dear Sweatheart." Like every marriage they've had their deep and painful trials. But they wove their constant self-giving love into me and my 2 brothers. Then to our children and their children's children. They wove a tapestry of love and grace into all our lives. Some of the really precious grace moments came when the great grandchildren all surrounded them on their beds.

Anyway, we took this video of them enjoying their own grace moment.

Dad would shuffle very slowly with Zimmer frame over to Mum who completely bedridden. He just wanted a kiss and to tell her how much he loved her. (Still his sweatheart). But Dad was also a bit of a crooner and loved singing. And one day he sang their signature song about being told they were too young to marry.

#### **VIDEO OF DAD SINGING TO MUM**



Many people have asked me how it was to say the final goodbyes to my Mum and dad and all my family. Well, it was huge but very sacred.

On the final day before we left, we had a momentous day. We had the Christening of my grandson Jesse who I got to hold for the first time. This was followed by a huge reception and a party with all the gathered family and friends. It felt like a culmination of all the emotions we'd travelled over the 5 weeks.

Kim and I then made our way back to 73 Severne Rd to Mum and dad for the final goodbyes. I held Mums hand, stroked her hair and told how much I loved her and how much she meant to all of us. There were no words of love left unsaid. I said a final prayer to her and gave her a final kiss.

I turned to Dad who was crying. We gave each other a great big man hug and again, no words of love were left unsaid. Kim and I then walked slowly to the front door of the house I was born in, closed the door for the final time, climbed into the UBER taxi and I cried all the way back to my daughter's house.

**How do I feel now.**

I feel that all through this sacred journey including this heart-breaking final moment, God's grace was always sufficient. I had quite few moments on this journey where I felt very vulnerable and fragile. But I always felt the power of God's gracious presence.

Each time I sensed God's tender whisper saying... "It's okay Josh, my grace will be sufficient for you. Even these moments that are feeling painful and emotionally overwhelming, through My grace I will turn them into something very precious."

As Bono sang... **'Grace finds beauty in everything'**. And in this I have my peace.