We love amazing grace—the hymn, of course, but particularly the *reality* of amazing grace. We love it, and we don’t. We don’t trust it.

In our Collect, we *pray* that God’s grace may always precede and follow us. Why? Perhaps because we don’t trust that it will be there? Why not, “Lord, we *thank you* that your grace always precedes and follows us.”

Naaman doesn’t trust it, either.

Before going into that, though, I want to air a grievance. Not with you, but with the folks who put our lectionary together. I’ll ask, but you don’t have to answer: Did you notice anything amiss in today’s first reading? I’ll bet some of you did. After that opening line in which Naaman is identified as a military genius and a leper, the king of Aram wants the king of Israel to heal him, right? Then, all of a sudden, the king of Israel is reading “the letter.” There it is. There’s been no mention of a letter, because of the three verses the lectionary omits. Frankly, if I’d noticed it before we printed the bulletin, I would’ve included half of those verses (4 and the first half of 5, to be specific). Well, here’s how it would read with that inclusion: “If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.” So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, “Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.” When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes” and so on. Boom. Problem solved. That’s “the letter” explained. But they didn’t ask me.

Back to grace. After that back-and-forth exchange between Elisha and the king, Naaman becomes upset because the prescription for his cure was so simple. He wanted more drama, more complexity, more effort on Elisha’s part and his own. We might imagine his thoughts: “What kind of penny-ante healing is this? I’ve traveled this far. I was prepared to walk on hot coals, eat spiders, or worse. And . . . come on, couldn’t the prophet at least have come out of his house himself? Shouldn’t he have parted the heavens and summoned the all-powerful God to come down and cure me?   
. . . But . . . wash, and I’ll be clean? Please!”

His servants were the ones who finally said, in effect, “Uh, sir . . . most mighty warrior? . . . what could it hurt? I mean, we’re already here, so why not give it a shot?”

And it works. The means for his healing had been there all along. He just had to perform rudimentary, simple task of washing as a way of acknowledging that. Now *that’s* amazing grace, whether Naaman likes the means or not. Of course (and I believe it’s a major point of this story) he afterward becomes a proclaimer of the great good news.

Here’s my point about Naaman. He really does not want the grace of miraculous healing to be free. Not really. He wants a big effort on Elisha’s part, on God’s part, and even, maybe especially, on his own part. He’s angry, incensed, that Elisha doesn’t make a big enough deal of this, sending a messenger instead of getting off his backside and going directly to Naaman himself.

We’ll leave Naaman for the time being.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes that he suffers hardships, even “being chained like a criminal,” the kind of stuff Naaman would admire, being a man of action, stoic, and tough. But listen again to Paul’s next sentence: “But the word of God is *not* chained.”

That line brings back to me so man experiences over my lifetime, experiences in which I’m struggling to do the right thing, to accomplish this or that goal. Those goals have changed significantly over the years, from making it through A&M and the army trying to be a decent officer and gentleman, to overcoming a struggle with alcoholism, to today’s challenges, which are more along the lines of “Did I offend someone with that remark?” and “Can I successfully drive a car and send an email?” In every one of them, past and present, from the simplest to the most complex, it has been God’s grace that did for me what I could not do by myself alone.

That last phrase is read in many 12-step meetings these days, taken directly from the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. It’s part of the passage known as “the promises.” “We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.”

To counter any thoughts that this might be hubris: This process of handling situations intuitively takes place over a lifetime with many fits and starts. The essence of this promise is God’s grace, which is greater than any one of us, greater even than all of us put together. And it is not restricted to those in recovery from addiction. It is the grace that cannot be chained.

Now, the gospel: Those *ten* lepers. I invite you to substitute the malady or disease of your choice for “leprosy.” This isn’t a lesson in biology or the medical arts. It’s about . . . yep, you got it . . . grace, and a response to that.

Jesus *does* tell the ten to fulfill the ritual requirements of the faith—maybe to show those who were watching, and particularly for the benefit of the Pharisees, that he is a believing, practicing Jew, a man of faith. But the healing happens while the ten were *on their way to* the priest. Sheer grace. Not dependent on fulfilling the requirements of religion, not dependent on their social or religious standing.

He makes that last point explicit by saying, “And look who came back to thank me, to thank God: this Samaritan, this foreigner” (feel free to substitute “this Democrat this Republican, this drug dealer, this Communist, or this Fascist” if it helps to understand the radical nature of Jesus’ acknowledgment of the Samaritan). He’s saying, I believe, that none of those categories could matter less to God, because we are all God’s children, and God’s grace is present for all of us. The way to acknowledge that it to be grateful, to live lives of gratitude and thanksgiving. To understand that our very lives are gifts from God, and accepting that fact prompts us to express gratitude in acts of kindness to others.

And that’s why, if I were asked, I would alter our Collect to say:

Lord, we thank you that your grace always precedes and follows us, and pray that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. + + +