



WEEK

1

Accept

The saints and mystics who have invested years in nourishing their spiritual lives and strengthening their union with God seem always to end by saying that acceptance and surrender are at the core of their being. We can try to do the same.

But it may not be easy. We live in a culture in which “acceptance” is not always welcomed or viewed positively. We are urged to see ourselves in competition with others—in what we do, in how much we earn, in the clothes we wear, even in the accomplishments of our children. Progress and personal growth have become the maxims of our time. Acceptance can be seen as a sign of weakness, dependence, and submission. We may not want to accept compromise, failure, weakness, or even our position in life. We are told we should become something more.

When contemplating the word “accept” as followers of Christ, we find a world very different from the one that surrounds us.

We must begin by accepting ourselves. Christ Our Lord told his followers, and us, to behold the lilies of the field. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, but they are beautiful. God cares for them. Jesus tells us to be like them, to accept God into our lives, and to accept ourselves. You will see flowers, trees,

or other growing things many times today. Think of how God cares for them—and how God cares for you.

We are weak; we sin; we are mean to those we love; we fail often; we do not measure up to our own hopes and expectations. Yes, that is who I am and who you are. But God loves us as we are—not as we will be when we have more money, or when our bodies are more attractive, or when we accomplish something wonderful, or even when we are less sinful. When Jesus became human, he took on the weaknesses and limitations of our nature and our world. He accepted who he was with all the disappointments that came with it. In his own town he could not heal because of the people's lack of faith. His closest followers continually misunderstood his message—hoping for an earthly kingdom with worldly power. Christ accepted himself and his world.

In odd moments today and during this week, consider yourself—your body, your mind, your abilities, and your faults—all of you. Accept yourself; God accepts you.

And then as you think of the word “accept,” consider those in your life and accept them. Your parents are not perfect; your children are not perfect. Don't worry about changing them. Relax and accept them. They live under the same challenging circumstances and the same kinds of cultural pressures and confusion that you do. Accept them and the others in your life, as they are. They love you and care for you, even more than you know.

There are certainly things that are difficult to accept—losing a job, serious illness, the death of one we love. And yet many of us have experienced God's love and come to a deeper understanding of who we are in these most difficult moments. It is not easy to accept cancer or other life-threatening illnesses. But in dark moments we can come closest to what is at the core of our being, closest to Jesus Christ, who after praying that he might not be asked to face terrible suffering and death, repeated three times to God, “Not my will but yours be done.”

We are promised that the Christian life ends in resurrection, in unity with God. And union with God is the reason for all prayer. So we should accept the wonder of God in our lives, and the wonder of our world, and the goodness of those around us. We are never, even for a day, beyond the help that others can bring. We should not be too proud to accept their help. If young, we should accept the guidance and wisdom of those with greater experience; if in the middle of life, we should accept the sharing, companionship, and good fortune of others; if older we should accept our declining strength and the help we need.

Accepting is not always easy, but with practice it can be rewarding. We do not have to strain so hard to see ourselves making progress or to be seen as rich and accomplished in so many ways. Best of all, accepting who we are, accepting God into our lives, and accepting others with all their goodness and all their faults gives us a new freedom.

Strangely, it is perhaps God's love and acceptance that is most difficult for us to accept. We want to judge ourselves harshly. But that is not God's way.

MENTAL IMAGE

Picture Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. They are shocked. Peter resists. Jesus proceeds quietly, telling them that they will understand.

SCRIPTURE READING

This week's reading is from the Gospel of John, chapter 13. In this chapter, we read what should be the ultimate source of acceptance. Jesus is the way to the Father, and we are connected to Jesus. In many ways, our faith will surprise us, as Jesus surprised his disciples.

Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean." JOHN 13:5-10

SCRIPTURE VERSE

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” JOHN 13:14

At the end of these meditations we will offer one or more suggestions to further focus the mind and heart and move to a deeper commitment. If you are so inclined, writing your reflections, commitments, and concerns might be helpful.

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Write down or fix in your mind one thing that you find particularly difficult to accept about yourself. It may be a quick temper, or a lack of sympathy for others, or a bit of stinginess. We are not talking about serious sins but areas of life that we are not quite satisfied with. Don’t make any great resolutions to change. Accept yourself. But know yourself.

Toward midweek: Write down several ways in which you feel more free and happy because you have accepted yourself with your faults, as God accepts you.

At the end of the week: Write a very brief prayer asking God to help you accept the work of the Spirit in your life.



WEEK

2

Peace

The refrain for a hymn we sing in church proclaims, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.” For some reason—perhaps the words, perhaps the melody—the refrain sounds a bit too precious when sung. But as a basis for reflection from time to time during the week, it can work very well. I am not the center of the universe, and I am very unlikely to achieve something really big. But in small ways you and I can initiate moments of peace—for ourselves and for others—throughout the day. This week, let peace begin with you.

Peace is, in the first instance, a lack or cessation of conflict. Many of the petty arguments that punctuate our days are about something other than what the words are saying. A discussion about politics may start with differences about the role of public agencies and private enterprise, for example, but quickly deteriorate into sarcasm and comments that are made more to dominate and win a point, or even to embarrass, rather than to honestly look for the truth or the best course of action. In the same way, a discussion about which restaurant to visit or which movie to watch can quickly have a subtext about who is in charge, who is making the decisions. But: “Let peace begin with me.”

A few days ago, as I drove past a landmark inn in our town, eight or ten people with signs for peace waved to the cars going past. These and others in the towns near us can be seen on weekends in quiet vigil. They remind us of the larger world where weapons are multiplying and killing is the solution to many problems. We live in a democracy, and in some small way each of us can play a role promoting peace beyond ourselves.

After several of his healings, Jesus said, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (see, for example, Mark 5:34). It seems not only that the healing ended the person’s troubles, but engagement with Jesus brought these people to a new level of rest and quietness of spirit. That engagement is still available. The Spirit of God dwells within us, ready to bring a deeper sense of peace. It doesn’t take a great deal of effort. During this week, accept the peace that God brings.

In Luke’s gospel, when Jesus, after his resurrection, first appeared to the disciples assembled and confused, he said, “Peace be with you” (Luke 24:36), and then he asked why they were startled and terrified. They were terrified in part because they thought they were in the presence of a ghost. But even for us, contact with God in Christ can be frightening. “Do I really believe? Am I able or willing to commit to the challenges that God asks of me? Do I want to be taken beyond what I can see and hear?” The answer of course is that the peace of Christ and our faith do enable us to live our lives in God.

In his last discourse in John’s gospel Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives” (John 14:27). In thinking about this promise, we come to understand that the peace given by Jesus is much more than the lack of conflict. The world might give that sort of peace, only to take it away again. The peace of Christ is quietness of soul. We rest in God’s love and in the assurance that nothing can separate us from that love.

And so we can paradoxically retain peace in the midst of unavoidable conflict. Problems with money, sickness, and personal relationships can be troubling, but they should not take away the peace that is in our hearts. Divers report that even when there are tumultuous storms at sea, deep down there remains a calm untroubled world. So it should be in our hearts.

Sometimes peace overtakes us unexpectedly. It may begin with a wonderful view of mountains or the sea; it may seem to be the result of a warm and reassuring conversation. But we should rest in that peace. God works through natural things to touch our hearts. And if we return to that peace, asking God's help to retain that view, and in times of disturbance to guide us as we make that dive below the surface, we will be refreshed. We will also be able to help others to find peace. For peace to live in our hearts, it must be shared. Like love, the more we give away, the more we have—so it is with peace.

MENTAL IMAGE

Jesus talks with his disciples at the Last Supper. He expresses great love for them and promises peace.

SCRIPTURE READING

In this reading, Jesus tells his followers that he is leaving, but the Spirit, the Advocate, will be with them, bringing peace. This peace is not the peace that the world gives. In other words, it is not the peace that might come from financial security, good health, or successful children. The peace of Christ goes deeper into our souls, and cannot be taken away.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you every-

thing, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.” JOHN 14:25–29

SCRIPTURE VERSE

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” JOHN 14:27

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Think of those things that tend to disturb your peace; think then about how insignificant they are compared with the peace of Christ that has been granted to you. Write down one or two of the things that worry you, taking away your peace. Just seeing them in writing will help you see how small they are compared with the peace in your soul.

During the week: Look for opportunities to bring a moment of peace to someone you know or even someone you meet casually. Pray that God’s peace may become more active in your life and that peace might begin with you.