



Don't be afraid.
I have rescued you.
I have called you by name;
now you belong to me.
To me, you are very dear,
and I love you.
I promised to save you,
and I kept my promise.
I am God now and forever.
No one can snatch you from me
or stand in my way.

—Isaiah 43:1, 4, 12, 13

WEEK 9

God's Love for Us— Healing Mercy

Guide: God's Love Heals Us

Last week we surrendered to God's forgiving embrace. We accepted and celebrated the forgiving mercy God offers us so that we might experience ourselves as *loved sinners*. This week we take the next step. Our God offers us more than forgiveness. God's love for us is so strong that it heals us.

We began with last week's loving embrace. Now we step back just like in the photo, and listen to the depth of God's love, saying,

I not only forgive you, I promise to always be with you, so you will never be alone. You no longer need your self-serving independence. I will heal your pride. I will free you from the destructive patterns that bind you. I promise to fill your heart with my love and with gifts of peace and courage and passion for sharing my love in service to others.

Throughout this week the photo can symbolize these words: "You are precious to me; I will heal you." Our journey has shown us so much brokenness. We have celebrated the forgiveness that frees us from our sins. Now, each day this week, in those background moments, we will let ourselves listen to the promise of wholeness. It is personal and addressed to me.

All week, we simply feel it. We let ourselves experience its power. Over the past several weeks, I have seen how powerless I am, how vulnerable to acting out of a rebellious spirit, to being *for myself* in too much of my life. All week I can imagine the gift of freedom from these patterns.

All week, we let our response keep rising up from deep in our hearts, "What return can I make to the Lord, for all God's goodness to me!" (Psalm 116:12) This goes beyond a feeling of gratitude and expression of thanks. A powerful experience of love always leads to a loving response. Love always leads to a desire for deeper union.

All week we will express our loving response, and our desires to be with our Lord in love. We will let it just flow from our hearts.

As always, use the resources here and online. Let's pray for one another—all of us making this retreat together—that this week will be a tender experience of the promise of healing love and a moving liberation of the response and desires from deep within us.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

This is the week when real joy and gratitude come together. Having experienced a depth of acceptance that can come only from the Lord, we now listen to the depth of the promise offered us.

When we experience the beginning of spiritual freedom, which comes with forgiveness, we are easily tempted to discouragement about how little we are able to change the deep-

seated patterns of our lives. Just as I realize that I am loved and that I have a deep desire to respond in love, I also realize that there are some bad habits I need to deal with, that there are some nearly automatic ways I am accustomed to responding to temptation and pressure.

As I listen to the Lord tell me not to be afraid, I begin to realize this is not about my own self-improvement program. As I hear the Lord promise "I will always be with you," I can feel a calm come over me. The words "I will heal you" give me a hope to overcome any discouragement.

So, the first and most important practical help for this week is to keep listening to the good news that we are not alone with our need for growth and depth and spiritual freedom and maturity.

The second practical help is to take anything that is still persistently bothering me—a sin from my past, a recurring sin, a stubborn pattern of unloving, just a coolness in my heart regarding the needs of others—and ask for healing. Ask as truly as if I were driving to a doctor's office to seek a treatment. Listen to the Doctor's words, "I can heal that." Be hopeful.

Finally, throughout this week, let the response come forth from our hearts. Practice the words "What return can I make to the Lord for all God's goodness to me?"

When the joy and the sense of freedom and gratitude all come together, just rest there. At this point, our prayer is as simple as lovers gazing at each other in love.

For the Journey: Grateful Confusion at God's Mercy

Each of us can quite easily remember the worst things we have ever done. In doing so, feelings of embarrassment or shame can arise in us even after many years. "I can't believe I ever did that!" "How could I have been so stupid!" "I hope nobody else

remembers my doing those things!" These are actually quite healthy interior responses to our shame-scattered pasts.

The healing of memories is not the same as erasing pictures of our more uncomfortable histories. Christian spirituality must be first of all psychologically healthy. Jesus embraced our whole humanity and lived our ways. We cannot demand or expect that God's forgiving grace ought to rearrange what is appropriately human. In short, God's grace of forgiveness, mercy, frees us for living with our memories of how we have chosen death in our pasts. Our remembering of our sins and the sins done against us does not mean we have not been forgiven or that we have not forgiven others.

This week we are invited to recall both our sinful actions and God's graceful responses. If shame and embarrassment are provoked, then how much more is our recalling of God's mercy invoked. "Where sin abounds, there does grace the more abound" (Romans 5:20).

In the Exercises Ignatius asks us to pray for "shame and confusion." He calls us to the grace of being both honest about our sins and confused about our status in God's eye. But there is another grace he asks us to request. We are to be not only embarrassed by our bad choices in the past but also confused by God's rather unjust response. Mercy is an unjust grace, and we are to stand at the foot of the cross in grateful confusion at such an inhuman response. Considering what I have done in the past and am likely to do again, here is the crucified Christ, offering me a future of his faithfulness to both my past and my days to come.

Mercy is both a forgiving and a foretelling. Each of us will return to the foot of his cross so as to live again from and with our pasts—into our futures and his. "We have here not a high priest who is unfamiliar with us" (Hebrews 4:15).

We can dwell in the shame and embarrassment of our pasts or dwell in the ongoing condition of the forgiven, who can live peacefully with our pasts as embraced by the ever-present merciful God.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Lord,

How can I thank you? How can I express the joy and gratitude in my heart? It wasn't enough for you to forgive me. You now promise to be with me, with me always, with me in the healing and wholeness I so desire.

Lord, when you let me see the many complicated patterns in my life, I felt so ashamed, so embarrassed. Then you told me that that isn't the whole picture of who I am—I am a sinner who is loved by you. Now you tell me that still isn't the whole picture. I'm a loved sinner, on the path to healing, because of your faithful love for me.

How can I thank you? What can I say when you tell me you won't abandon me because I'm *unfinished*? What feelings fill me when I imagine your sticking with me in the slow, day-to-day growth of healing?

As you have been with me throughout this retreat and have freely given me what you yourself have placed in my heart to ask, I now turn to you again and beg. Please let me hear the depth of your desire to accompany me along the path to wholeness, to holiness. Please begin your healing in me. Please let your healing free me so that I can serve you as you deserve, with more and more of my heart.

Hear my humble prayer, O Lord of faithful love.

Scripture Readings

Ephesians 2:1–10

Colossians 3:9–17

Romans 5:1–11

Mark 2:1–12