

Grace and peace (Ephesians 1:3-14)

It's hard to greet people with a blessing without sounding ostentatiously pious.

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There's a lot of theology packed into three sentences at the beginning of the letter to the Ephesians. They are preceded by an opening blessing: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The subjunctive mode is inherently prayerful: may it be so. May you walk in grace and live in peace. More than an expression of goodwill, it reaffirms that all the words to come are wrapped in prayer that the writer's words be instruments of grace and peace, however complex, admonitory, or confrontational they may seem. The blessing is a frame.

It's hard in our culture to greet one another in a comparable way without sounding ostentatiously pious. I've appreciated how some have adopted the Eastern tradition of bowing and acknowledging each other soul to soul with the word *namaste*. What if we Christians did something similar? Paused, opened our hands, and said simply, "Grace and peace to you." Something might shift in the subsequent conversation.

The theological scope of this passage from verses 3 to 14 is impressive. It begins in gratitude, reminding readers not only of what God has done for their earthly lives but "in the heavenly places," since "before the foundation of the world." Suddenly we are reminded who we are—souls beloved and held, created, fallen, forgiven, redeemed, and guided in this world, dwelling in the mystery of time and of purposes we can't fully fathom even as they unfold. The text addresses us as spiritual beings on an earthly journey, headed toward where we will know ourselves and God more

fully. While we are here, we see through a glass, darkly. And we see just as darkly when we gaze into the mirror.

When I think about the challenge of authentic self-awareness, I often recall Regan's words about her foolish father, King Lear: "He hath ever but slenderly known himself." Clouded by pride, insecurity, or narcissism, Lear's lack of self-knowledge is the fatal flaw that leads to his tragic end. The tragedy is mitigated by love—Kent's and Cordelia's, both of them Christ-like in their fidelity and forgiveness. But the play spares nothing in spelling out the consequences of self-delusion.

In the interests of unity, the epistle urges the Ephesians to encourage one another not only in gratitude but also "speaking the truth in love" to one another. Some truths are hard. Holding one another accountable, calling one another to greater self-scrutiny—this can sound (and be) judgmental or self-important. It takes skill and prayer as well as courage to build a beloved community in which it is possible to foster maturity in the ways Ephesians encourages.

But what a gift it is when it happens. Quaker meetings have committees whose purpose is to "admonish" members who appear to speak or act more out of need for attention than out of prayerful listening. The purpose of admonition is not to chastise but to call members back to what they know about God and themselves: that they are beloved, accompanied, witnessed, and guided by a Spirit who invites but does not force our consent and cooperation as we grow toward the source of life, like plants toward the sun.