



Nine Days of Grace: Novena 2018

In the autumn of 1537, Ignatius was on his way to Rome with a group of his first companions. As they walked, he asked them: If people ask us who we are, how should we answer? The answer came spontaneously: We shall say that we are the Society of Jesus.

They knew immediately that this name suggested a relationship of very close friendship and great love for Jesus in whose footsteps they wanted to follow. They understood that Jesus was a great teacher and model of the life of faith and that he was not only teaching them and modeling for them this life, but was inviting them to be with him on this path, just as he had invited the first disciples to be with him.

And isn't that why we are here today to begin this novena, these nine days of grace? We are called to be with Jesus, to walk with Jesus, to be his companions, to love him.

Today's readings remind the people of Israel –and us—who we are—

We are the people to whom God has drawn close—

The first reading acknowledges that this is the greatest gift—

“What great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon the Lord?”

A sign of God's closeness to Israel and to us is the gift of God's commandments.

Much as a good and loving parent makes clear to a child how to live and love, so God's commandments are a sign of God's great love.

The commandments were given to Moses for the people in the context of friendship and love.

The book of Exodus says that “the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend.” And Moses taught the people what he learned from his closeness to God, inviting them into that same closeness and love.

Given that the commandments are the sign of God's friendship and love, it is no surprise that Jesus comes not to abolish the law—not to abolish the ways that God was revealed to the people—but to fulfill the law—to invite his followers into God's great love.

So, when Jesus gives his new commandment to his disciples, he also does so in the context of friendship.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. ...but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”



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It was a friend of mine from graduate school who first invited me to be a companion of Jesus.

I had grown up Catholic. I had been taught the commandments. I knew I was loved by God. I was taught to live as Jesus did, and that is what I desired and strived to do, to live as Jesus did, and, even, in my childish ways, to suffer with him.

But my friend, a Jesuit priest, taught me to be a companion of Jesus—to follow, to live as Jesus did, of course, but even more, to be a companion, to love him. And that invitation changed my life.

If I had to put words to those early days of falling in love with Jesus, I would say that I had been wooed by Jesus, invited to share his life, drawn into God's love.

I discovered that it was no longer only about observing Jesus' actions and keeping God's laws.

It was about the closeness of Jesus, the nearness of God, and intimacy and love.

And that is what defines us—that is who we are—companions of Jesus, beloved of God.

We are the people who hear and remember what God has taught us,
what Jesus showed us by his love and faithfulness,
We are people invited into a relationship of love

These nine days of grace offer us the gift of being companions of Jesus, of friendship with Jesus, of loving and being loved by Jesus. As in prayer, all we have to do is show up—either here or online, and God will do the rest—love us into fullness of life and love.

There is something more—as always.

It is not enough only to receive this incredible gift of God's nearness and love. The first reading is clear: we must not forget what God has done in drawing close to us, and we must pass this gift on to others.

“However, take care and be earnestly on your guard not to forget the things which your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your memory as long as you live, but teach them to your children and to your children's children.”

We have been given a great gift—the closeness and love of God.

we invite others as Jesus invited his followers,
as Ignatius invited his companions,
as my friend invited me.

To be strengthened for this shared mission of love, we come to the table,
we come together as companions—literally, those who break bread together—



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to receive again the gifts of Jesus' life and love given and poured out for us,
to become the body of Christ for others and in the world today,
to be sent to love as we have been loved.

And who shall we say we are?

We are the companions of Jesus—lovers of God and all God's people.

Victoria Ries

Day 1 | Wednesday, March 7, 2018