Miranda: In a society that is so focused on success and on competition, it’s difficult to not get caught up in the “hoop-la” of everything and leave ourselves behind. But that is exactly what we are being called to do in the reading from Isaiah. We are not supposed to serve others for our sake, but for theirs.

Beth: But don’t we have grace? Why do we have to do all of this if grace is enough?

Miranda: Grace may be “enough,” but it isn’t about a free ticket to heaven—we shouldn’t stop there. Grace allows us the freedom to forget about ourselves as we serve our neighbor. There is no longer ladder climbing to get into heaven, we aren’t constantly concerned with ourselves or what it means for us. Instead, the yokes have been broken so that we may do our best to serve others even knowing that it will never be enough.

Beth: I suppose you’re right. There is more to grace than just ourselves. Grace also gives us room to choose how we live and act, it lets us choose who we want to be and what we want to do. Grace was given for everyone, and it is easy to allow the choices that we make hinder another person’s freedom to live and be who he or she is if we are not constantly mindful of our actions. We have to give grace, we can’t just take it. We must be responsible with the grace we are given and always be mindful of the way our actions affect others in both harmful and helpful ways.

Miranda: Not to mention it’s sometimes easier to help others only with the intention to feel better about ourselves. While the effort is still commendable, it usually ends up only making matters worse even though the intention was to help. The intention is there, but it’s not pure. By truly caring for and loving people you not only change the situation, you also change the person, allowing room for dignity and for life. It really does make a difference.

Beth: So it’s not really about doing it to help ourselves, but to serve others who are in situations of need.

Miranda: And rather than going into a situation to save the day and become the hero, we should go in to walk with the less fortunate. This illustrates how we are all on the same journey rather than emphasizing our differences.

Beth: No kidding, when I was in the Cities, a woman who was homeless was telling us about how she went to a church and the women’s group asked what she needed. She kept telling them the best they could do to help the homeless was to give clothing and help in the struggle for affordable housing. They sent her home with a turkey for Thanksgiving.
Miranda: It’s unfortunate that we don’t listen to people when they explicitly say what they need. It’s an example of how we always think we have the right answers, even without the experience.

Beth: We can serve a meal at a food shelter or build a home with Habitat for Humanity one day a month, which does help the situation of people, but we also need to go beyond that and live in a way that does not make the problems worse, but rather helps the issue. Short-term solutions are not enough to change the world. Collectively we must live to permanently free the oppressed and not just try to be the hero for a day.

Miranda: It may be easier to write a check or donate a couple of hours to a local charity, but we are called to go beyond that.

Beth: Listening is such an important part of loving others; if we do not listen to the needs and learn about others, it is difficult to actually help. But it’s a long process.

Miranda: So how can we feed the hungry in our daily lives?

Beth: Well, even though it is a tough thing to do, there is a lot we can give up. Living simply leaves more resources for others and for the future. We should constantly evaluate our actions and the way they impact others. Not only that, but it is easy to talk with the people who make policies and encourage them to keep in mind those in need, and not just those who contribute to their campaign.

Miranda: Yeah, and every little thing counts. While we may be called to go above and beyond, we can’t forget about the “smaller” things, those do not become insignificant. We don’t always see the impact of our actions, but that doesn’t mean we aren’t making a difference. The best change is long-term change, which is sometimes tough to do because it is long and hard work. There is no such thing as an easy fix. But we can’t be discouraged because the results can’t be quantified or necessarily even seen. It is so much more than that.

Beth: Right. Making sacrifices is not about seeing the results, it’s about giving ourselves for others and not expecting anything in return. But we always do end up getting something in return because by loving others you become the light in the darkness and you become surrounded by that light, receiving love from those you have loved. This all sounds great, and I hate to be selfish, but if I’m so caught up in caring about other people, who is going to care about me?

Miranda: That’s a fair question, and like you said, when you love other people they typically end up loving you in return. You have to trust the community that you are serving that as you give to them, they will give to you. Plus, loving and serving others doesn’t mean that you have to forget yourself completely.

Beth: Just think about it, you won’t be much help if you’re starving, exhausted or without money.
Miranda: Right. The key is to not get wrapped up in the material things and remember there are always opportunities to share with those less fortunate. You have to take care of yourself by knowing your own needs and limits. If you trust in your community and in God, I think you will be pleasantly surprised at how well you will be taken care of.

Beth: I suppose there are stories here and there about God providing for God’s people when they are in need. But those verses can be frustrating. God doesn’t always provide for everyone—if God did we wouldn’t need to be having this conversation. I guess if we lived as we are being called to though, things would be a little different.

Miranda: Imagine what the world would look like if we were to follow what verses 6 & 7 say: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” That’s some pretty powerful stuff right there.

Beth: Scripture often challenges us to go against social norms and even laws that oppress people, which can be really scary. We have to go out of our comfort zone to minister to those in need. We need to do more than just draft a statement of rights, we need to live it and honor it daily.

Miranda: Even though it seems like God doesn’t always provide for everyone, we can’t use that as an excuse. We are responsible for caring for others and being God’s hands and feet in the world.

Beth: That’s a hefty order, but it’s comforting to look around and see that we are not alone in this quest.

Miranda: That’s right. It’s not a personal call to save the day, it’s a call to the body of Christ to work together and serve the needs of all people. We’re not alone. We have an entire support group to help us. Things wouldn’t get done if it were left up to just one person, but sometimes it takes just one person to get the spark started.

Beth: Plus, as the passage stated, God is with us when we call out. If we are doing what we are called to do, we also need to trust that by the grace of God we will be given the tools and talents to get the job done.

Miranda: God never abandons us on this journey; in fact, it’s just the opposite. God is with us as we serve our neighbor.

Bdawg: So we all know that it’s a good thing to help others, but this passage from Isaiah shows us that doing good is more than just showing up. Being invested in the lives of all people and living for loving relationships is what truly makes a difference. You can’t just do a good act, you have to be in the act, truly involved with the people.