

Sermon: Seeking Grace
Rev. Martha Hodges May 17, 2009

I am moved by the thought of Grace, and seek to understand it. I don't understand it, but I know it is there.

I first started thinking about this word "Grace" when I heard a story that I know I've told you before. The one about the children in Appalachia who would wait beside the railroad tracks, knowing that the trainmen, as they rolled by, would throw some chunks of coal down to them, so that their homes could be warm. The children's faith in the goodness of the trainmen, their trust that they would not, could not, be left to shiver through the night, is so like our own. This faith that tells us that this world is good, and waiting to bestow its gifts upon us, to answer our deepest needs, regardless of who we are. This faith that tells us that strangers know what it is to suffer and, recognizing in me, in you, a fellow sufferer, will allow kindness to move through them and out of them, into us. This faith that, with our flaws, we, simply by virtue of being alive, deserve to be cared for and even loved. The certainty that we are all children, shivering by the train tracks, waiting for the love that we are certain is about to come rolling toward us, in all its power, delivered by means of other flawed and hungry and yearning children. This certainty I find deeply moving and satisfying and mysterious. This is the Grace I seek to understand.

I know that it is not the Grace that our Universalist forebears and Christian friends celebrate – the Grace that is the salvation bought by Jesus. The Grace that assures us of forgiveness for our sins because Jesus suffered and died for us. This particular understanding of Grace is not one that speaks to most of us as present-day Unitarian Universalists. Yet, the Christian understanding of Grace – that love, that joy and forgiveness and reconciliation, come to us, not by any merit of our own, not because we deserve it or have earned it, but simply because we are children in need, humans in need – this concept has much to say to us.

So I ask you to put aside any UU prejudice toward traditional Christian language, if prejudice you may have; to put aside, for the moment, our rejection of the doctrine of Original Sin with its conviction that we humans are inherently depraved and in need of saving – put this aside for the moment and consider. Consider what we stand to gain by reintroducing the idea of "Grace," a UU understanding of Grace that does not violate our deeply held principles that we are inherently worthy and responsible for our own choices and our own saving.

It is because we need to temper this faith in our worthiness with a healthy dose of humility, along with a bracing confrontation of the evils that we humans inflict upon ourselves and one another, that we need an understanding of Grace.

The non-theists among us may be thinking that, without a benevolent and personal God, one that looks out for us and cares for us and determines our lives, a God whose eye is on the sparrow – without such a God, the very idea of Grace is irrelevant

nonsense. Non-theists may prefer to speak of luck – good or bad. Yet, I am looking for something that is different from luck.

Luck is winning the lottery, making all the green lights, holding on to a job in rough economic times, finding the right doctor who can help us recover from an illness. And God, I believe, has nothing to do with these things. Luck is in the things that happen to us. Grace is something that happens inside us.

If luck is being beside the train tracks when the trainmen roll by; if luck is those trainmen happening to see the children waiting, then Grace is in the hope of the children that brings them to wait beside the tracks; Grace is in the kindness of the men that tells them to slow down and fill a sack with coal and toss it to the waiting children

It is luck to have been born in a wealthy country, to parents who could provide for us and love us. If it is not luck, we have to believe that we are more deserving than those who live with hunger, war, or abuse – and we know this simply isn't so. But if it is mere dumb luck that we are safe and comfortable, it is Grace that tells us that it could have been otherwise.

If God is that loving connection between people; if God is the interdependent web that holds us together as we stumble, dance, plummet or fly toward one shared destiny, then let us say, "There but for the grace of God, go I."

But if, on the other hand, God is a loving parent who sheds his Grace on some, despite their shortcomings, then how can we explain why this God denies these same gifts to others? Truly, we cannot. And this arbitrary God who allows some to prosper while others suffer, is not a God that I, for one, could love and worship. One of my colleagues who had been a devout Christian told me that this question started her on the path away from her family's faith and toward Unitarian Universalism. As a hospital chaplain, she could not embrace a God who allowed a young mother of twenty-five to suffer through a painful death from cancer while she, a young woman who was equally human, equally flawed, enjoyed robust health and the prospect of decades more of life.

I would tell this colleague that her patient's illness and death could not be explained as the work of God, or Grace, but were simply luck – bad luck. If there is any Grace to be found in this story, it resides in the dedication and skill of her caregivers, in the love of her family, in the moments of acute awareness of the preciousness of life.

This kind of Grace is dug out of the ruins of life. This is the Grace of the alcoholic who hits bottom and chooses not to stay there. This is the Grace of the abused woman who finds the courage to flee for her life; the would-be suicide who discovers she owns her life and will not give it away without a fight. This is the Grace of second, and third, and infinite chances. The Grace that comes packaged in pain, disguised as despair. The gift of infinite value, but of finite price.

In all these instances, Grace occurs in the intersection between the great, though impersonal, gifts of life and our awareness of them. Our seizing the chance; our saying thank you, our being filled with wonder. Grace is not luck. Grace is something that happens inside us.

One of my favorite things in the world is to see a flock of birds in flight. As they ride the thermals, the air streams that carry them through the sky, they tilt their wings this way and that to catch the air. The sun glints off their feathers as the birds circle, rise and fall, in a living pattern of light and shadow, all in a formation whose edges shift and flow and never fail. I am amazed by the wonder and beauty of this world. I am amazed by Grace.

For it is the nature of Grace to amaze. It is the gift that comes to us, unexpected and unearned. Sometimes this gift is a moment when everything just seems to fit, to flow. Sometimes it is in forgiveness, freely given. It can come in the form of a word or a gesture or an insight. It can come in the form of birds, or music, or rain, or a cool breeze on the back of your neck on a hot day. It can delight, comfort, heal, enlighten, or, in that wonderful word of our Universalist forefather, Hosea Ballou, simply “happify” us.

But the birds, the breeze, the kind word, are only part of the equation of Grace. There must be someone – us – to receive the moment, the gift. Grace tends not to hit us on the head to get our attention, though sometimes it does. More often, it’s a lot more subtle. We have to look for it, and to know it when we see it. We need to be willing to be amazed. For it is the nature of Grace to amaze.

It amazes us because it is unearned and is unnecessary to the continued turning of the earth. But while it may be unnecessary to survival, it makes life worth living – and it is free. A life without Grace is dull, colorless and tasteless. We could live on a diet of poi, which, as I understand it, tastes something like wallpaper paste. But when mangoes are hanging on the trees, we grab them and sink our teeth into their tangy juiciness. Poi is luck. Mangoes are Grace. They make life sweet.

The ancient Greeks understood Grace. You’ve probably seen depictions of the three Graces. They always appear as beautiful young women, sisters, standing close together, usually holding hands or with their arms around each other’s waists, frozen in mid-dance. Their names are Aglaia, which means radiance or splendor: the Grace that makes us want to create beauty for its own sake, and the Grace within us that makes us love the creators of that beauty; Euphrosyne, which means joy or mirth: the gift of slapstick and satire, the Grace that allows us to respond to life with joy; and Thalia, my personal favorite, whose name means good cheer or fruitfulness. The party girl, the personification of celebration, who spends a lot of time with Dionysus, the god of wine and wild behavior. She likes to dress up and hang streamers on Mt. Olympus.

But good cheer has another meaning. It means enjoyment, but it also means comfort and encouragement. As he prepared to leave them, Jesus consoled his disciples, saying “be of good cheer.” He didn’t mean they should throw a party. He meant, be

brave, be hopeful. When we feel defeated or afraid, Grace brings us a sense of perspective, the long view. It allows us to find courage within ourselves, and determination.

Grace brings us the birdsong telling us that a long and sleepless night is about to end. It brings the fever that breaks, and the cool hand that strokes our forehead until it does. It tells us, don't give up just yet. This is what it means to be of good cheer.

No wonder these three, Aglaia, Euphrosyne and Thalia, stand so close together – beauty, joy and comfort – three aspects of this Grace that amazes us and brings sweetness to life.

Does the world need to be so beautiful? Absolutely not. Do we need to laugh in order to live? Do we need good cheer? Hope? Art and moments of holiness and forgiveness in order to survive? No. To be happy, no doubt. To be fulfilled, and at peace; to discover or create meaning, very likely. But to survive as individuals or as a species? Not really. These are gifts. These are free for the taking.

Grace lives in our openness to the sweetness of life, to beauty, joy and comfort. But we are not mere recipients of Grace. We are also instruments of Grace. Through us, others know Grace. Through our talents, our humor, our insights, our love, comfort and encouragement. Through our ability to look someone in the eye.

When I was growing up, my mother taught us that it was important to have certain *social* graces. We were always being reminded to nod and smile at strangers, to hold doors for people, to thank people for the small routine acts they were required to do anyway. If we said to her, "Oh, I saw so-and-so at the store today," she would invariably respond, "Well, did you *speak* to her?" We would roll our eyes and say, "Yes, Mother, I *spoke* to her." *Speaking* to people meant more to my mother than saying some words. It meant recognition – saying to the person, "You matter."

To recognize someone's humanness this way is to be an instrument of Grace. Those of us who have worked in service jobs know what this means. The customer who sees who you are, even for the two seconds when your eyes meet, is rare. Usually, they keep their eyes on the counter, on the wall behind you, on the money in your hand – anywhere but on your face. To look into the face of a stranger, whether it is the parking lot attendant, someone at social hour here at church, or the man on the corner asking you for spare change, is an act of Grace – for both of you.

I don't know where this Grace comes from. I don't know why the world is so beautiful, why people are so funny, why we love to celebrate, why the universe is so full of Grace. I know that Grace is all around us, and in us. That it amazes, and that sometimes it is all that keeps us going. I know that it can come from us and through us, as well as to us. And I know that if we are not open to it – to receiving it and to giving it – it will pass us by and our lives will be less than they ought to be.

We must look for it, for we need it. Sometimes, it comes to us easily. Other times, it takes concentration and effort to find it. But it is there. Of this I have no doubt.

This is why I speak to you about Grace in its various forms, as I continue to explore it in my own mind. About the extravagant and quite unnecessary beauty that is in the world of nature and that we create for the sheer joy of it. About music and humor and imagination. About friendship and forgiveness. About words – poetry and metaphor and invention. About faith and hope and interdependence. Memory and conscience and creativity. Generosity and compassion. All these things that are full of Grace, these gifts of beauty, joy and comfort that make life sweet and give it meaning. These “extras,” these delicious and gorgeous icings on the cake of life. Gifts that we do not deserve and cannot earn; that simply are. Gifts that it is our unique calling as human beings to notice, to celebrate and to pass on.

As we declared earlier in our responsive reading: “For all things which come to us as gifts of being, from sources beyond ourselves..., we lift up our hearts in thanks this day.”¹ May it be so. Amen.

¹ “We Lift Up Our Hearts in Thanks” by Richard M Fewkes, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Boston, Beacon Pr., 1993