

Sermon What Do We Do with Grace?

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Yesterday, I attended a workshop on leadership development along with over a hundred lay leaders and clergy from 43 congregations. One goal of the day was to help us see leadership as a spiritual practice. As our presenters were warming to their theme, someone asked, "How does this work for people who don't identify with the word spiritual?" The response was, "love and caring. Ask yourself how do I demonstrate love and care for my congregation in what I do."

I mention this because many of us may not precisely identify with the word grace. This word is heavily vested with meaning from religious traditions – and that meaning may be difficult for us to identify ourselves with. My response to you is, use another word, another idea – maybe love, maybe luck.

You see, I'm going to be talking in very utilitarian terms today. Our responsibility as spiritual or loving beings is to reach for that which will help us be more wise and compassionate and effective in the world. We are not looking for signs we are perfect, we are looking for signs that getting better at being humane is worth the effort. We are not looking for signs that things around us are perfect, we are looking for signs that we can help make them better. I'm not going to be talking about a *state* of grace. My theology tells me it's more important to look for it and recognize it when we see it and use it when we understand we've seen it. Grace may or may not exist, but it certainly means nothing unless we make something of it.

Grace is just one idea to help us figure out how we are cherished in this life in spite of everything; and, more importantly, how we will change inside and respond in life when we know that we are loved and accepted and acceptable. If someone's grandmother gives us clothing when our home is blown up, what will we give in return? If no one gives us clothing when our home is blown up, what will enable us to give in return?

The question isn't why them and not me, or why me and not them. The question is how do I go on to be a decent person in spite of everything, and how do I make a difference for the better. Grace is not about who is saved and who is not. Grace is what we look for when times are tough. Or it's what we realize that makes it worth keeping on. Grace is about recognizing acceptance and shared strength when we see it. Grace is about what we do with that sure and certain knowledge that we have been given love.

It's pretty hard to talk about grace right now. Eric Garner in New York, Michael Brown in Ferguson. I couldn't have predicted months ago when I chose this theme that our airwaves would be dominated by their killings. Luke Somers, Pierre Korkie in Yemen. What if they had been my children? What if I had endured years of captivity and oppression – what could I possibly know of grace? What could I possibly know of grace with my mortality or my children's mortality staring me in the face at every turn? We are all mortal, some of us know that more than others. And some of us are in the power of others who believe it is right and necessary and expedient to threaten or maim or take a life in the cause of a greater good. My friends, this is exactly the context that gave birth to grace. This is the context in which our forebears spread good news for thousands of years. Our lives were and still can be short, fragile, and easily torn apart. In spite of this, and throughout history, our prophets want us to live good and honorable lives.

The idea of grace comes to us from thousands of years and many traditions. We can trace the word back to Sanskrit, to Latin, to Anglo-French and Middle English. The ancient origins of the word grace revolve around notions of charm, favor, gratitude and praise. In Greek it is *charis*. The Hebrew word *chen* associated with grace appears in text related to help, healing, refuge, strength, rescue and salvation. Over the centuries, the essential understanding of grace for Christians became a freely given gift of God that is unmerited and unearned.

How can we understand grace? I am not suggesting that, "Everything happens for the best in this best of all possible worlds." Unlike our Christian forebears, we tend not to dwell on which of us are the elect and granted the grace of God and which are not. We definitely don't claim that believing in Jesus or any other all-encompassing power is a requirement for us and everyone else. But I do suggest that we hold on to the transformative power of grace. Grace may not be a state, in my view, but it can be an intention, an interaction, a transformation. Something happens inside us to let us feel welcomed by the universe. Something can also happen inside of us that makes us feel capable of being a force for good. Grace is the intentional counter-narrative to despair. It is the story we reach for in the midst of all the awful things that can happen. It is the good that comes out of the evil or in spite of evil. It is the story of the Vietnamese grandmother trying to atone for her grandson.

When we speak of the Boston bombings, we also speak of the men and women who ran toward the dust clouds and debris to do what they could for the injured. We speak of gravely injured Jeff Bauman and of Carlos Arredondo who rescued him; Arredondo, who prior to that terrible day, was a father grieving the loss of his own two sons.

When we speak of 9/11, we also tell the story of Usman Farman. He was the Pakistani Muslim college graduate knocked to the ground as the South Tower fell blocks away and hordes of people were fleeing around him. A Hasidic Jewish man broke from the crowd, approached him, read the Muslim prayer engraved in Arabic on a pendant around Farman's neck, then extended his hand and said: "Brother, if you don't mind, there is a cloud of glass coming at us, grab my hand, let's get the hell out of here."

"As I found out, regardless of who we are, and where we come from, we only have each other," wrote Farman. As far as I know, Farman has never been able to find his rescuer.

Our responsibility to ourselves and each other is to find a way to be in the world, to live a wise and compassionate life. A few weeks ago, a number of you came up to me after the service to let me know what you think about life. One of you believes with all your heart that nothing happens without a reason. Another believes that life is completely random, that there is no reason, only events that occur by chance. I honor your perspective on life, your faith in how things happen and how the world works. Even though you have very different views on life, there is still room for grace or love to help you to live it with kindness and purpose. Can you look for ways to experience joy in your life and to pay it forward? It is a choice, and it is yours to make.

How about you? Have you experienced what you would call a moment in the midst of your messy, painful, disorganized life that you would call grace? In times when you were most unhappy and restless, most hungry for something, anything, to lift you out of the life you had, did you experience something that changed you – or changed things for you? Was it completely unexpected? Grace is that which lets us be here in this life with the possibility of joy. We don't have to do anything other than bask in that possibility. But it makes us think we can.

But therein lies the catch. What if we don't want to be lifted out of our unhappiness? What if we are just fine, thanks, being miserable? It all comes down to what we think we deserve. It all comes down to how we make sense of our misery. And it all comes down to what we think others around us deserve. If no one offers us the possibility of joy, why should we be expected to offer it to others? And if we do offer it to others, maybe we do it out of martyrdom rather than the obligation of joy. And if that is where you are right now, I offer you my complete understanding and my sympathy. And I offer you my hope that your way to be in the world welcomes you and gives you peace. The existence of grace is a promise that we all deserve to be in this world in a way that welcomes us and gives us peace.

I am here because of moments of grace – that is how I choose to see it. I choose this even though life has not always been good to me or mine. I am here because, in the words of Charles Stephens, I am accepted just as I am by something greater than my individual life.<sup>1</sup> I am the product of fortuitous events from the Big Bang onward. You are, and I am the descendent of those who survived – by chance or love or by a stranger's kindness or all of these. My dad, the first-born son of Russian immigrants, survived the 1924 diphtheria outbreak in New York City when was eight years old because an exhausted doctor was willing to come to their tiny apartment and stay with him throughout the night.

I am here because of a chance encounter. Sixteen years ago, my primary care physician passed me in the hallway of my HMO while I had my kids in for their annual check-up. And she said I was years overdue for my mammogram and to just stop stalling and make the appointment. That mammogram revealed I had a cancer that was completely hidden from me, and would have been until it was too late.

We are of this life. You and I may go through fear and pain and fury and, no matter how long it takes us, no matter what the reason, we can come out the other side to joy. It is light and energy in the vast reaches of dark matter. It is moments in life that tell us there is love. Such is grace, if we let it. Such is grace.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Charles Stephens, UUCWC » Sermons - Rev. Charles Stephens, Minister Emeritus » What is Grace to a Unitarian Universalist.htm