

“Amazing Grace! A Field Guide for Unitarians”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Opening Words

We gather this day to celebrate life’s gifts of grace:

That we build on foundations we did not lay,
warm ourselves at fires we did not light.
That we sit in the shade of trees we did not plant,
and drink from wells we did not dig.¹

In this hour we make sacred in our coming together,
let us give thanks for the ordinary miracles
that make our lives what they are.

Reading “More Than We Deserve” by Robert R. Walsh

I heard the 2nd Brandenburg Concerto played in honor of J. S. Bach’s 300th birthday. I was swept away. I remember a story about the people who send messages into space in hopes they will be heard by intelligent beings on other planets. They were trying to decide what content would best tell them who we are. Someone suggested that we send something by Bach. The reply was, “But that would be bragging.”

Some say we get what we deserve in life, but I don’t believe it. We certainly don’t deserve Bach. What have I done to deserve the 2nd Brandenburg Concerto? I have not been kind enough; I have not done enough justice; I have not loved my neighbor, nor myself, sufficiently, nor praised God enough to have earned a gift like this. The[re is] an urge to life that is somehow built into everything. Your life is a manifestation of that urge. Your beating heart, your seeing eye, your questing mind, your love, your service, your enjoyment, your suffering, are all substance pushed toward life and freedom by the creative process. . . . This is a gift we have not earned and for

¹ Freely adapted from Deuteronomy 6:10-12.

which we cannot pay. There is no necessity that there be a universe, no inevitability about a world moving toward life and then self-consciousness. There might have been—nothing at all. Since we do not deserve Bach, or crocuses, or lovers, the best we can do is to do our share in the world of creation, and to keep telling the stories.

Sermon: “Amazing Grace: A Field Guide for Unitarians”

It ranks as one of my all-time favourite cartoons.

Two guys are walking along a commercial fishing pier, next to a very large ship.

They’ve just barely missed being crushed
by the massive anchor of the ship
which has, only seconds before, crashed down next to them.

They only managed to dodge certain death
because they had quickly moved out of the way of a dockworker
who was crossing their path pushing a cart loaded down with crates of fish.

Stunned by their good fortune,
the first of the two men who’ve just sidestepped an untimely end,
turns to the other and says: “There but for the case of cod.”

I have long loved this cartoon, not only for its clever play of words,
but even more for its theological commentary.

How often have we heard people—or even heard ourselves—
say that they were somehow saved by the grace of God?

I know that for many, there is comfort to be found in those words—
in the idea that it is divine intervention
that sometimes gets us out of a bind, or helps us in a pinch—
the idea that we can somehow dodge a bullet
if God pulls some strategic string on our behalf.

But, I just don’t buy it.
Aside from the larger question of who or even if God is,
I think this idea gives God way too much credit
and doesn’t hold God sufficiently accountable for the state of the world.

If God has that much power to fix things at whim,

there's an awful lot left to answer for in this world of ours.

Which is why one of my core requirements of theology is consistency.

If one's theology is to have integrity, it must be true for everyone.
It must hold up not only when it's convenient,
but under the toughest of circumstances, too.

That's why I just don't buy it
when someone says that by God's grace
their airplane was kept aloft or their cancer cured.

I don't buy it because it doesn't hold up
in the face of the sometimes very hard reality of the human condition.

It doesn't hold up in the face of the disasters that aren't averted,
the bodies that aren't miraculously healed,
or the lives not easily put back together
in the wake of the worst the world can dole out.

If I'm wrong—if it is the grace of God that keeps us from hardship or heartbreak,
it's only fair to admit that this type of grace is in appallingly short supply.

And, yet, I find, there's something still to be said for grace.

It is a complicated word with many different meanings.

One can say grace over a meal,
recognize a saving grace, or, in the Christian tradition, be saved by grace.

Something or someone wonderful is said to grace our lives.

One can enjoy a grace period,
be in a state of grace, be in someone's good graces,
and when that no longer holds true, can be said to have fallen from grace.

Frederick Buechner writes that:

After centuries of handling and mishandling,
most religious words. . . become so shopworn

nobody's much interested any more.

Not so with *grace*, for some reason [he says].

Mysteriously, even derivatives like *gracious* and *graceful* still have some of the bloom left.²

But truth be told, I'm guessing that more than a few of us here this morning aren't entirely comfortable with talk of grace.

In Unitarian circles, grace tends to be a bit more of a "wounded word" than Frederick Buechner lets on.

That makes some sense.

Even among those of us who hold a belief in God, there's usually a healthy skepticism when it comes to assessing the validity of anything that borders on being miraculous.

Put another way, where some people see the grace of God, Unitarians tend to see instead the "case of cod."

We look to the skill of the pilot to explain the successful landing or to the new medication to make sense of someone's cure from disease.

There are many different ways to interpret a windfall of good fortune.

A few years ago, during seminary, I got into a bit of a theological tussle with a dear Unitarian friend of mine.

I was leading a service in Emerson Chapel, which I discovered a few minutes before the service was to begin was not adequately stocked with hymnals.

A quick call to a couple of friends on the other side of campus resulted in the arrival of plenty of hymnals just in the nick of time.

As I was thanking my friend for orchestrating this last-minute delivery, he said, as a theist, just to get my goat as a humanist and knowing I would respond, "Shawn, you've just got to trust. See, God always provides."

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*.

To which I said, “That may be so, but I find it interesting that it’s always human hands that seem to be doing the work!”

Such friendly banter is one of the best parts of a seminary education. Done right, it’s one of the best parts of being a Unitarian Universalist.

When we listen, we can very often learn from one another, and we occasionally even come to change our minds.

That day, outside the chapel, my friend, through our jousting, was offering me a lesson in grace, be it human or divine.

It, like so many other moments, was there for the taking.

And, that’s why, even as a deeply agnostic Humanist, I can’t seem let go of grace.

It’s not because I see it as a divine force at work in the world. I don’t.

But because I find it a meaningful way to understand and describe those blessed, transforming moments that fall into our lives without our having done anything to deserve them.

We do, indeed, drink from wells we did not dig and enjoy the shade of trees we did not plant.

We are given to bask in the glory of Bach and so much else. And, sometimes that case of cod does, indeed, arrive just in time.

All of it is a gift—a gift I’m ever more inclined to call grace.

Frederick Buechner says that:

Grace is something you can never get
but can only be given.

There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about, any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams.
Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace.

Somebody loving you is grace.
Loving somebody is grace.
Have you ever *tried* to love somebody? [he asks.]

[For Buecher,] the grace of God means something like:
Here is your life.
You might never have been, but you are [here and now]
because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. . . .

[It's all a gift.]

There's only one catch[, though]. Like any other gift,
the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.

There are two reasons we would do well to accept grace *graciously* when it comes—two reasons why I think it's helpful to look at life's blessings as grace.

In deeply recognizing those gifts that come our way
without our having laboured for them,
we come to ground our lives in gratitude.

And, we learn to live with greater humility—understanding
that we so often get by in this life on the kindness of strangers.

Knowing in our bones that we survive on blessings we did nothing to bring about.

Knowing that as much of an individual as we might consider ourselves to be,
we are ultimately buoyed up and sustained by others.

Knowing that the unmerited blessings that come our way,
also serve to remind us that things could so easily be otherwise—
reminding us that our lives are both precious and precarious
and that everything can change in an instant.

“There but for the grace of God go I.”

Words of gratitude and humility.

Whether we call it grace or chalk it up to good luck, these are, it seems, the natural and fitting response to those moments when our fortunes change for the better.

But we should also understand that grace
is not merely about catching a lucky break,
it is also about those moments
that light breaks in when and where its needed most.

The theologian Paul Tillich gets at this in the most famous passage from his sermon “Shaking the Foundations”:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness.
It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley
of a meaningless and empty life.

It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual,
because we have violated another life, a life which we loved,
or from which we were estranged.

It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference,
our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure
have become intolerable to us.

It strikes us when, year after year,
the longed-for perfection of life does not appear,
when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades,
when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness,
and it is as though a voice were saying:
“You are accepted. *You are accepted,*
accepted by that which is greater than you,
and the name of which you do not know.

Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.
Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.
Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything;

do not intend anything.
Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"

If that happens to us, we experience grace.
After such an experience we may not be better than before,
and we may not believe more than before.
But everything is transformed.

In that moment...reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement.
And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral
or intellectual presupposition, nothing but *acceptance*."

It's not always so easy to accept grace when it comes.

Earlier, I said I believed that there were two vital reasons to do so:
the all-important practices of gratitude and humility.

I would add a third.

By accepting grace when it comes our way,
by allowing ourselves to sink into that radical sense of acceptance,
we, in turn, are able to be agents of grace,
offering that powerful gift to others.

Simply put, this is the most enduring way I know to change the world.

Several years ago, the columnist Regina Brett recounted a true story
and a genuine moment of grace.³

On the surface, it's the story of a basketball game,
and involves a dad and a son.

The dad wanted his son to see the big Wadsworth High Senior Varsity game,
so they arrived at the gym early to get a good seat.

They sat in the bleachers and waited for the Junior Varsity game

³ This story was originally appeared in Regina Brett's column in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*. I'm relying on the telling by Rev. Millie Rochester in her sermon of February 9, 2009, "Struck by Grace."

that was already underway to come to end.

Suddenly, with one minute left on the clock, that game came to a halt.

Wadsworth was winning by ten points
when the Cloverleaf High School coach stopped the game.

The crowd buzzed, wondering why he had called a time-out
when there was no chance of winning,
when everyone was anxious for the next game, the real game to begin.

That's when the dad noticed the short, thin player sitting at the end of the bench
wearing the green Number 10 jersey for the Cloverleaf Colts.

When the player rose from the bench, the dad noticed the boy's limp,
the slight tilt of his head, the way his eyes looked a tad off,
the scarred ear that had never finished growing in the womb.

The dad didn't know that a shunt in the boy's head kept him alive,
drained the water from his brain and kept him from playing sports to the fullest.

The boy couldn't afford to be hit in the head. Doctor's orders.

The coach had planned to put Adam Cerney into the game,
no matter how close the score.

He knew how badly Adam wanted to play against the school's biggest rival.

The dad and boy in the bleachers watched as Adam caught a pass
and launched a shot from well beyond the three-point line. He missed.

But, instead of pouncing all over the ball to charge down the court
and rack up more points, the boys on the opposing team didn't move.

They wanted Adam to have another chance.

The clock ticked down. Adam shot and missed.
Twelve seconds. He missed again. And again.
Ten seconds. Nine seconds.

The Wadsworth team refused to take the ball.

One player even motioned for Adam to come closer,
but the boy declined.

By now, everyone was standing and cheering for Adam Cerny.

The people who knew him shouted his name.
With four seconds left, Adam launched the ball.
The buzzer split the air as the ball swooshed through the net.

The crowd went wild.
Fans from both teams stood to cheer and clap.
The Wadsworth players shook his hand and patted his back.

The two referees on the gym floor applauded.

One turned to the other and said over and over, “Man, was that nice.”

The dad in the stands began to cry.
When he looked up, his son, a child of five,
asked if the tears were because the Cloverleafs had lost the game.
The dad just smiled.

I don't know about you, but that is the world I want to live in.
That's the state where my heart longs to be—
a state of certain and satisfying grace.

The first of the six sources of Unitarian Universalism states that we draw on
“Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder,
affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit
and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.”

If that's not what was at play on that basketball court, if it was not grace,
I'm not sure what was.

We have all been that boy with the ball.

We have all stood at centre court needing nothing more than a second chance,
and nothing less than radical acceptance.

May we then, with gratitude and humility,
be gracious in all that we do, and in all that we are.

Then will we see grace all around,
and glimpse a world being made new.

Amen.

Closing Words from Kent Nerburn, *Small Graces*

We seldom pause to shine a light upon the ordinary moments,
to hallow them with our own attentiveness,
to honour them with gentle caring.

They pass unnoticed, lost in the ongoing rush of time.

Yet it is just such a hallowing that our lives require...

For though we may not live a holy life,
we live in a world alive with holy moments.

We need only take the time to bring these moments into the light.

So be it.