

Of Grace and Gratitude

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

25 October 2015

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.

It still rates 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,
looks to where the enormous anchor has just landed
and turns to the other guy and says:
“There but for the case of cod.”

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

In an amusing but astute way, it speaks to the notion of grace,
and goes right to the heart of the great human question
of why bad things happen to good people.

That universal question asked just as everything is going wrong,
when we look to the heavens and wonder aloud, “Why me?”
Or put another way, “What did I do to deserve this?”
Throughout time, people have answered this question in a variety of ways.
Frankly, most of us answer it in radically different ways across our own life.

Some would say this question is the reason for religion itself—
as we mortals seek to make sense of our lot in life.

We look up and out and mutter, “Why me?”

Sometimes the answer is karma.
That we had it coming.
That every action has an opposite and equal reaction.
That there are consequences that follow on
from what we’ve done or what we’ve left undone.

At other times, the answer from the universe comes across
as a more unsettling sense of seeming indifference.

“Why me?”
“Well, why not you?”

Though this question often comes to us just as things are falling apart,
it is also asked, though usually less often, when everything is going our way.

“Why me? Well, *why not me?*”
“Don’t I deserve this?”
“Haven’t I worked hard?”
“Am I not a good and worthy person?”
“Of course, I am,” we often convince ourselves,
as we pat ourselves on the back.

It’s easy to doubt that worthiness when our life is in shambles.
And it’s easy to overestimate it when life is grand, and all is well.

We humans can be creatures of habit, if not consistency, when it comes
to understanding why both hard and happy times befall any life.

I suspect this is because it’s difficult to accept,
especially in the challenging times,
that things just happen—sometimes without a good reason,
or without any reason at all.

That it’s simply how the world works;
that it’s just part of the bittersweet bargain of being alive.

At other times, it should be said, though,
that we can struggle against accepting
a reason that is clear, but profoundly uncomfortable for us.

We can possess amazing powers of denial, at times,
when we'd really rather not accept responsibility or blame for something.

Now, I lay all of this out this morning,
because our understanding of why
both good and bad things happen to ourselves and to other people
affects how we move through this world.

What we believe about these things shapes
when we take credit or blame for ourselves,
and when we assign it to others.

It shapes what we think of people who are homeless,
and of people who are wealthy.

It shapes whether we think someone deserves the catastrophe
that came into their life, or whether we write it off as a bit of bad luck.

It shapes whether we chalk up someone's windfall to good fortune,
or see it as something we're so insanely jealous of,
we can simply no longer stand to be around them.

As many of you will know, several years ago,
Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book
whose highly notable title is very often misquoted.

He's frequently credited with writing a book called
Why Bad Things Happen to Good People.

In actuality, his book is titled
When Bad Things Happen to Good People.

That we stumble over the difference is telling, I think.

To ask *why bad things happen* is to suggest that something—anything!—
might have been done to avoid them.

To ask about *when bad things happen*
is to accept that tragedy can come into any life,
to recognize that heartache is part of the human condition,
to see and understand—with apologies to our Buddhist friends—
that at least some suffering is inevitable.

To ask about when bad things happen is an expression of hope,
a sign of resilience, as we seek the way forward
when the path before us is no longer clear or has been lost altogether.

This being human asks a lot of us.

But it also gives so much more than it takes,
which is the other reason I've turned to this topic today.

How we understand why bad (and good) things happen,
as and when they always do,
also affects our ability to see the unfolding of grace around us.

To see the miracles that attend every day.
To know nothing can be rightly labeled as ordinary
in this marvelous world of ours.
To feel moved over and over again by the grandeur of being alive.

The best definition for grace I know of is that it's simply
life's gifts that we don't earn, expect, or deserve.

Life's gifts that we don't earn, or expect, or deserve.

Gifts we didn't see coming.
Gifts we did nothing to bring about.
Gifts we couldn't buy with all the money in the world.

It's fair to say that life itself is the greatest gift of grace we've been given.

That we are alive, here and now, on this spinning blue, green ball
in the vast dancing cosmos is nothing short of a miracle,
whether you attribute that miracle to God, to the steady drive of evolution,
or to some other force at work in the world.

We are children of the universe—
each of us having come forth from the depths of time
to live for such a precious moment upon this earth.

Bill Bryon reminds of us just how very contingent our lives are.

“Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years...,” he says,
that “every one of your forbears on both sides
has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, and
sufficiently blessed by fate and circumstances to do so.
Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned,
starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded,
or otherwise deflected from its life’s quest of delivering a tiny charge
of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment
in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations
that could result—eventually, astoundingly,
and all too briefly—in you.”

It’s good to be reminded that each one of us
is a project billions of years in the making—
born of the very elements of the universe that have danced their way through
time and all of living history to take shape
in the body that we each know, here and now.

When we take that in, when we truly take in this astounding feat,
it should be more than enough to make us pinch ourselves,
for wonder that so much effort and such good fortune
have gone into creating each and every one of us.

And it should be enough to convince us that grace abounds in this world.
For our life isn’t something we could possibly earn, expect, or deserve.

When we come to terms with this, the fact of our very being,
we can’t help but see how it so easily could have been otherwise.

How one twist or turn in the story would have meant a world without us.

This was, quite literally, brought home to me a couple of years ago,
when my husband Bob devoted himself to exploring his genealogy.

He traced his ancestors from New England through Quebec

and back to 16th century France.

Poring over church records written centuries ago, he realized he's related in multiple ways to the founding families of Nouvelle France, that one of his direct great-great-great-grandmothers had Samuel de Champlain for her godfather, and that many of the women in his family tree had been sent to Quebec as "Daughters of the King," the 800 or so young women who were sponsored by Louis XIV to emigrate here to marry the men and grow the population.

All of that was intriguing and exciting to learn.

And then Bob discovered a horrific story that was less easy to embrace.

It was about a grandmother dating back to the late 17th century.

Her name was Isabelle, and she was only twelve years old when her father forced her into an abusive marriage with a man in his 30s.

Over time, as Isabelle complained to her mother about the abuse, her parents came to support her and decided to do something about the situation.

The initial plan was to poison their daughter's husband. Isabelle's mother made a toxic soup and served it to him piping hot. The problem, though, was that it seemingly had no effect.

When Plan A failed, a fight broke out between the mother and the son-in-law.

Eventually, the father came on the scene, grabbed a garden tool, and struck the younger man repeatedly until he was dead.

The sound of the scuffle caught the attention of the neighbours and within a month, the parents and Isabelle were found guilty and sentenced to death.

There was no appreciation in that era that domestic abuse might in any way justify or explain such a violent act.

Fortunately, on appeal to a higher court,
a judge decided to spare Isabelle's life,
though she was required to watch her parents' executions.

In time, thankfully, Isabelle remarried,
and had nine children of her own.

I say that because had she not lived, had she not remarried,
and had she not given birth in 1676 to a daughter named Catherine,
the man I love would never have been born.

In asking Bob's permission to tell this story—
and I should say that he asked, "you want to tell that from the pulpit?"—
I reassured him that throughout human history,
it is almost certain each of us has had
similarly dramatic twists and turns in our own storyline.

His just happens to be recorded in full and graphic detail
in Quebec's court and church records.

There are countless moments
when the story of our lives could have so easily been otherwise.

When the delicate conditions that sustain life on this planet
could have gone another way, and with them
the possibility we would ever know what it means to breathe in air,
to taste the splendour of strawberries, and feel the marvel of love.

Friends, we are here, then, by grace.
It's reasonable, then, that each of us might wonder,
"What on earth did I do to deserve this?"
That we might ask, "Why me?"

May we hear the universe say in response, "Why not you?"

May we live out our days with the only fitting response—
a heart full of gratitude and a life devoted to being agents of grace,
for generations of life still to come.

May it be so. Amen.