

"What Grace Is--And Isn't"

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Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church

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Luke 15:11-32; Ephesians 2:1-10

"There, but for the grace of God, go I." Which of us has not said those words, perhaps more times than we are comfortable admitting?

I spoke last week about the empathy gap that prevents us from sensing and, to a limited extent, sharing how others experience the world, especially in its harsher settings. The familiar adage I just quoted bridges that gap. It's an acknowledgement of our shared humanity, especially our frailty, our vulnerability, and our capacity to inflict harm.

The grace of God, if we will let it, can open us up to more of reality than most of us can imagine, and it can also save us, penultimately and ultimately. "For grace you have been saved through faith," our second lesson says, "and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God."

We know that any one of us could have been born on the wrong side of the tracks, as we used to say – into poverty, with its many attendant and often cyclical comorbidities, and perhaps some of us were.

We know that any one of us could have been born with physical or mental or spiritual challenges that most of the rest of us don't have, and perhaps some of us are living with those challenges as we worship now.

We know that any one of us could have been born susceptible to some temptations and not others, and we know that any one of us, under the right – or wrong – conditions could crack, break, and succumb, turning one or another of those temptations into lived behaviors.

We know that all of that, and so much more, is possible, and we also know that it is only through God's grace, and our effortful cooperation with that grace, that the dire possibilities of some do not happen to be ours.

From that knowledge, then, flows humility for those with sufficient common sense and decency to know how much we need it. God's grace is available to everyone, but it cannot be presumed upon. It would be unwise to say, as Catherine the Great is supposed to have said on her deathbed, "God will forgive me, that's his job." Don't presume on grace.

I once heard that a conductor of Handel's "Messiah" stopped the chorus and said, "When we sing, 'All we like sheep have gone astray,' might

we do so with a little more regret and a little less satisfaction?" Don't presume on grace.

Humility, properly understood and lived, isn't about thinking less or poorly of oneself. It's about thinking honestly about oneself. It is to see oneself as a sometimes baffling, sometimes frustrating, sometimes distressing, and sometimes alarming mixture of wants, needs, desires, hopes, victories, failures, insecurities, achievements, missteps, and regrets.

And living with true humility is to recognize that same richness and complexity in every other person, a trait that we learned in Writers' Circle a while back has a name: sonder. Sonder is that awareness that everyone has a story, and that no one's story is privileged, not even one's own. We are all, as the conservationist Aldo Leopold described us, "plain member and citizen" when it comes to the biosphere, the universe, and God. We humans keep wallowing in the self-congratulatory sense of superiority stemming from our opposable thumbs and over-developed cerebral cortexes, but being unique doesn't make us special, it simply makes us the rule. Uniqueness is all around us if we'd simply open our eyes and look. So far as we have been able to determine, every snowflake is minutely different from every other snowflake, and if Jesus had lived and taught in a different climate, he might very well have told us, "Consider the snowflakes of the field, how they fall."

When I was a dean of students in a highly selective college, one of my commonest tasks was to reassure extremely bright and extremely able and extremely fragile undergraduates that they were just as bright and able as they had been before they arrived at Harvard College; the only thing that had changed was that all the other fish in the pond were just as bright and just as able and just as vulnerable as they. For some students, having been told from a very early age that they were exceptional, the burden of being ordinary was almost unbearable. They were all still unique, but none of them was still special, and for a handful of students in every class, that loss of status was disorienting and debilitating.

I suspect, as I continue to reflect on Jesus' little story of the farmer and his two sons, that the younger boy had something of the Harvard undergraduate about him. You may have heard the old joke that says you can always tell a Harvard undergraduate – but you can't tell him much. And the same would apply, in varying degrees, at Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, and, dare we admit it? Oberlin and the College of Wooster.

The younger son thought he was special and asked for his inheritance early and then wasted it, giving truth to the saying that youth is wasted on the young. What got into that boy, we might reasonably ask ourselves? Was he simply the spoiled last child, since there are only two children mentioned

in the story? Had his mother, like Rachel, died giving birth to him, making his grief-stricken father, like Jacob, unwisely indulgent? Or had his looks and brains and charm made him the charismatic pretty boy life of every party, as the young David appears to have been in the court of Saul?

We search in vain for causes and Jesus didn't seem to care. What mattered to Jesus was behavior, and we have three contrasting embodiments of behavior that bear the name of each one of us at some point in our life. None of us is the all-welcoming father, sour elder brother, or feckless and remorseful wastrel all the time. If we are honest in our self-digging, we will find all three of those characters somewhere in us at some depth, and when we do, we might hear ourselves murmuring, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Today's parable is about grace, certainly, the grace shown in the father's forgiveness that opens the door to the younger man's second chance. And Jesus could have put a bow on this parable by saying, "Go, thou, and do likewise," but he didn't, because grace, like all forms of love, is tricky. When does love/grace/forgiveness become an enabling indulgence? That's the question raised by the father's behavior, and there's been more than one parent or partner who looked back over years of interacting with a child or a spouse only to realize that they spent years enabling bad behavior. That's not grace.

When does a counsel of "turn the other cheek" become a tacit approval of violence and abuse? When does not challenging irresponsible behavior itself become irresponsible behavior? Neither of those is grace.

These were the sorts of questions that we wrestled with a couple of Saturdays ago when the Writers' Circle took up the topic of grace, prompted in part by a column on this subject by Nayiri Karjian, our UCC Association General Minister.

"In the language of faith," Nayiri wrote back in February, "Grace means an undeserved free gift. . . . Grace is not a reward. It is not a prize you win. It is not a blessing we worked hard to obtain. . . . Grace is a gift . . . that takes us beyond the ordinary . . . beyond mere human action or thought, to the Sacred, the Divine, to the mysterious and the unimaginable, to the incomprehensible and the amazing. Grace is another way."

That last short sentence gave us pause in the best sense of pause. "Grace is another way," and that way, I would suggest, is the way of Jesus, the way of both/and rather than either/or.

So many of our difficulties, it seems to me, come from our imprisoning ourselves in binary either/or thinking: it's this way OR it's that way, it's good OR it's bad, it's right OR it's wrong, it's give OR it's take, etc.

But the abundant life that Jesus promised us – Jesus, whom the church declares to be both human AND divine – that one promised us a life that is more give AND take than it is give OR take. Jesus put at the center of his teaching and his life the paradox that we receive our lives when we give them away. Could history prove the truth of any statement more than the truth of that one? Jesus literally gave his life to ransom many and many still today, two thousand and some years later, proclaim his life, death, and resurrection as the truth that saves.

The world says we receive our lives when we take; Jesus says we receive our lives when we give. And this is one of those moments when life really does become binary: we can choose the world's way OR we can choose Jesus' way, but we keep struggling to choose both and we keep wondering why Christianity doesn't work.

There is a beer commercial running on television just now that says, "In order to truly embrace the fine life, you must learn to let go," and I doubt very seriously that the creators of that ad had any of Jesus' teachings in mind when they put it together. But the truth remains: the well-lived life, as defined by Jesus the Christ, means letting go in order to receive. And that is the work of grace.

In Jesus' little story, the father had to let go of his younger son in order for that son to make his mistakes and eventually, as the text so wonderfully puts it, "come to himself" in order to return to the place of true love and acceptance. That is grace.

The younger son had to let go of his idea, handed to him by the perennial culture of party-central, that the good life consists of chemically-manufactured hilarity, sensual self-indulgence, and more, bigger, and faster. Slopping the hogs helped bring him to that moment of release and grace, and the parable invites us to ask the question how long that process of discernment took and whether that turn would ever have happened had the money not run out and his party-going friends not run away. Jesus, in his little stories, often asks as much as he tells.

And the elder brother would have to turn loose of his understandable but self-defeating sense of his own good-boyness in order to live in harmony with those who mattered most to him. At the story's end, he had not made that turn and had thus not received that grace. The love shown by the father to his younger son was just as available to his elder son, but the older man couldn't accept it, and so there was no moment of grace.

And while grace is a gift, that gift has to be accepted in order for grace to work. Grace floating around in the atmosphere isn't worth much as far as

our actual lives are concerned. The only grace that matters is the grace we receive, the grace we live, and the grace we extend.

We cannot presume on grace anymore than the younger son could presume on his father's acceptance of him. The father had every right – some would say even an obligation – to tell his younger son to keep moving, because the boy had disgraced his family, and in the culture of this parable, shaming one's family is a grave and lasting wrong. The boy admitted as much when he said that he was no longer worthy to be called his father's child; that was a true statement, not hyperbole.

But the father undermined that way of looking at rights and wrongs – the world's way of looking at them – by showing that grace has nothing to do with worth or deserving. No, the boy did not deserve to be called his father's child, but that didn't prevent the father from doing so. That is grace. Grace is receiving that which we do not and cannot deserve; if we deserve it, then it's not grace, it's compensation.

None of us is here because we are entitled to be here. We are here solely because of God's grace. Everything is here because of God's grace. Perhaps that's why Albert Einstein said that we can go through life as if nothing is a miracle or as if everything is a miracle, and he preferred the latter.

I hope all of us will, as well.