

"THE ARRIVAL OF GRACE"
A sermon by Rev. Roger Bertschausen
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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www.fvuuf.org

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Reading: from *Grace (Eventually)* by Anne Lamott

We moved into our current house six years ago, when (my son) Sam was ten. In the old house, our bedrooms had been very close, but in the new place, we were separated by two rooms and two short hallways. He started coming into my room in the middle of the night, curling up on my bed with his own blanket. I tried the obvious ways of helping him get his confidence back—a nightlight, bribes, Power Ranger sheets. Nothing worked.

Finally, Sam and I came up with a solution. The first night, he put his sleeping bag and pillow right beside my bed... The second night we moved the sleeping bag three feet away, to the foot of my bed. The next night, he moved three more feet away. On the fourth night, he made it to the door. He slept there two nights before he was able to put his sleeping bag in the hall. I kept the door open.

“Are you okay?” I called to him in the dark.

“Yeah,” he said, in his small but manly voice. The short hallway to the living room took three nights to master. Then there were four nights in the living room, as he crept overland closer to his room, with four three-foot scootches, one stall, and one night when he had to drag his sleeping bag back three feet. Sometimes he would call out, “Good night” again to hear my voice. There was one valiant worried night in the hall between my study and his room.

“See you tomorrow, Mom.”

“Love you, Mom! Doing okay out here, Mom.”

A few times he called for me to come sit with him. My nearness lifted him. Sometimes grace works like water wings when you feel you are sinking.

And then, at last, he spent his first night in his spooky new room, bravely, on the floor.

That’s me, trying to make progress at all with family, in work, relationships, self-image: scootch, scootch, stall; scootch, stall, catastrophic reversal; bog, bog, scootch. I wish grace and healing were more abracadabra kinds of things; also, that delicate silver bells would ring to announce grace’s arrival. But no, it’s clog and slog and scootch, on the floor, in silence, in the dark.¹

¹ Anne Lamott, *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 2007), pp. 49-51.

Sermon

I believe in grace. This continues to be a cornerstone of my spirituality. I've done sermons about it a few times and decided that it's a topic I wanted to take one last shot at before leaving. So I was glad when the topic made it to the monthly worship and learning theme list.

What is grace? I define it very simply as any gift that we didn't earn and don't necessarily even deserve. Unconditional love is a great example of a gift of grace. So is the simple fact of being alive. I did nothing personally to gain the blessing of being alive. I'm guessing none of you did, either.

"Grace," writes Anne Lamott, "meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."² She's saying that grace is a gift that impacts us, that somehow changes us. The change may be momentous or it may be as tiny as a change in attitude in the middle of a bad day. Imagine being mired in self-pity, for example, and unexpectedly you get a chance to hold a baby for five minutes. The baby melts into your body, warming you literally and figuratively. You feel more peaceful. The self-pity melts away. A deeper perspective takes its place as you sit there holding the baby. Then the baby and the baby's parent go on their way. At the end of the day you might not even note this as one of the high points of your day, and yet still it changed something in you. It left you in a different place. This is grace.

Where does grace come from? Who is the giver of grace? Let me cut to the chase on this: I don't care where it comes from. I don't care who or what gives us grace. Maybe it has some sort of a divine origin. Maybe not. I find myself generally in tune with our worship leader Dee when it comes to the origin of grace. It makes more sense to me that little droplets of grace come to us randomly, by happenstance rather than from a benign divine being dispensing grace from above, or wherever that divine being resides. This view of grace's origin certainly does not diminish grace for me. Not in the least!

What really matters to me is that these droplets of grace exist. Whether grace is a random gift from the universe or an intentional gift from God doesn't change anything about its reality. Whether God by design put that baby in your arms to get you off the pity pot or you just randomly ran into a parent with a baby doesn't change one iota the fact that holding the baby has changed your attitude. So I don't worry about the source of grace. God? Random luck? Aliens? Who cares! It's a blessing. That's all that matters.

How can we help grace come into our lives? This is a great question. I mean, grace is a gift that has the power to transform us in small and large ways. So let's figure out ways to get more of it! Here's the problem: we can't. By definition, we can't. Remember: grace is an unearned, undeserved gift. So what we do has no impact on whether it comes. There is no abracadabra chant you can do to make it come. There's no magical prayer. You wave your wand like Harry Potter and make it come. It comes from beyond you.

That said, I do believe that we can cultivate the *possibility* of grace coming. A great way to do this is to create time and space in our lives for spirituality. (And I define spirituality as connection with that which is most important in our lives—so make time for that connection.) If

² Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor, 1999), p. 143.

from the moment you roll out of bed in the morning to the moment you climb into bed at night and click the light off you are always on the go, well, it creates less possibility for grace to arrive. "I'd love to hold your baby, but I've got to go finish an assignment--and geez, I hate being so busy. Poor me! I have no time to hold a baby!" And you walk away. With these words you cut off the possibility of grace. You're still squarely on that pity pot, stuck in the same place you've been. Grace has basically come knocking at your door and you've yelled through the mail slot: "Go away! I'm too busy!"

For me, I find that grace doesn't seem to visit as often especially when I don't exercise or meditate or eat well or go out in nature regularly—when I am less grounded spiritually and in my body. When I don't do these things, I live disconnected from what's most important to me. I live obliviously, without intentionality.

I've found myself in this place recently and it's amazing how much harder I've made it for grace to find me. I know the answer: even though it feels like I'm drowning in work here and getting my house ready to sell and exploring work possibilities after I leave here and missing my beloved, I've got to make time for spiritual and physical grounding. Unfortunately this seems to be a lesson I have to keep learning. I suspect some of you keep running into the same lesson, too.

And this leads me to another fundamental truth about grace: we have to notice it. It doesn't, as Anne Lamott writes in today's Reading, announce itself with silver bells. Often it is very quiet and subtle (which is not to say unimportant). Sometimes it's not at all subtle and somehow we still manage to be oblivious to it. This is where being grounded spiritually and in my body comes into play once again: when I'm not either of these things, it's a whole lot easier for me to fail to notice the droplets and sometimes even the rivers of grace that come my way. I hold the baby but the whole time think about the assignment I need to get back to or the errands I need to run or the leaves I need to rake. I'm holding the baby, but mentally I'm elsewhere. Grace knocked at the door. "Yeah, come in." And then I ignore it and go back to whatever else I was doing. Maybe more than anything, spiritual practice is about raising our awareness so we don't miss life's magical moments in a cloud of obliviousness.

(An aside: the more I think about it, the more I think obliviousness may just be the number two enemy of living a spiritual life—right behind fear. I'm going to add obliviousness on my list of seven deadly sins.)

I'm going to share some widely varying moments when grace has visited me. I do so in the hope that you'll get in touch with some of grace's visits to you.

My first moment involves forgiveness. When someone forgives us, that is certainly a moment of grace. Especially when we've done something that is very hurtful, there is really nothing we can do to deserve or earn forgiveness. Even apologizing from the bottom of our hearts and behaving differently moving forward doesn't earn us the right to be forgiven. We can't make someone forgive us. It's their free decision. So forgiveness is a gift we don't earn or necessarily deserve—in short, it's grace.

The most powerful gift of forgiveness I've received came fairly early in my relationship with my life partner, Amy, well before we got married. Without that gift, everything that has unfolded for us and our family over the years--starting with our children--would not have happened. That act of forgiveness is truly the gift that keeps on giving. In the scheme of my life, it was a very big deal.

Going down to a much smaller-scale experience: I've had the gift of grace plenty of times in writing sermons. I've shared before about the time I was writing a sermon very late one Saturday night--in the days before we had a Saturday service--and I had nothing. I was getting more and more tired by the minute but at the same time more wired with worry and angst. That's a terrible combination. Then all of the sudden the image of a painting I had studied years earlier in college popped into my head and the whole sermon suddenly flowed out and gelled. "Where did that memory come from?" I have no idea where it came from. Whether it was the Muse the ancient Greeks talk about or a random firing of neurons in my brain, it came, and it was a beautiful thing! It was a gift from beyond. It was grace.

That kind of happened this week, too. I was a bit stuck with this sermon and found I needed to keep working on the sermon as kids came by trick-or-treating on Friday. Great, I thought, this is not exactly a good sermon-writing environment! Every 30 seconds the doorbell rings, the Chihuahua howls and I get up to dispense some candy. But somehow, this was just what the Muse needed to visit.

A moment of grace for me as a parent was the incredible gift of having two very different children and the realization that nurturing is important, but so, too, is hard-wiring. These two children, born from the same gene pool yet so different, took a bit off the pressure of me as Dad. Yes, I needed to do my best to raise them, but how they turned out wouldn't completely ride on Amy and me being Super Parents. Some of how they would turn out was built into who they intrinsically are—beyond our ability to ruin! What a grace-filled relief!

I remember a grace-full moment in my mom's dying. I was talking with my mom after her doctor told her and us there was really nothing else that could be done to forestall the multiple problems that were killing her. He recommended hospice. She had fought like hell for five years to stay alive, but now she made the decision it was time to shift gears from fighting to comfort management. As we talked, I mentioned to my mom that now there was now no reason for her not to have a martini. She loved her martinis, but several years earlier had reluctantly given them up because of her illnesses. She gave me a look like "Really? You aren't messing with me, are you?" And then when I told her it was true, she gave a big smile. That moment of lightness and that smile in the midst of a dark night of the soul was such a gift! I think it was her last real smile. As it turned out, she died before she got that martini. I was momentarily disappointed by this, but quickly realized that just the thought of having the martini was gift enough--for her and for me.

Here's a more recent gift of grace. As many of you will recall, I predicted early last month that the Supreme Court of the United States would rule on marriage equality at the end of this term--in late June of 2015, just after I complete my work here. I lamented in advance not being able to participate in weddings of gay and lesbian couples here—especially those like our own Ligia and

Miriam who had applied for a license in June but then lost the right to marry during the five-day waiting period the Outagamie County clerk refused to waive.

Well, I don't think Supreme Court prognostication will be my next career. Literally the very next day the Court decided not to review the appeals court ruling upholding marriage equality in our state, and marriage equality arrived—hopefully for good this time. You also may recall that a consolation for me if the Court made the decision in June would be that our Associate Minister, Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg, would be in the position of doing weddings and being in the media limelight, thus further cementing her position in our Fellowship and community.

As it turned out, I was on a flight to New York to see my son when the Court decided not to review the appeals court ruling. When I landed and turned my phone on, there were all sorts of messages. I stared with disbelief at my phone. But I was in New York for several days, so...Leah got to do several weddings that week as I hoped, and I got to do Miriam's and Ligia's this past week. All gifts from beyond my making!

There was another gift this past week besides the unexpected, sweet and amazing honor of officiating at Ligia's and Miriam's wedding. After their wedding, Miriam and Ligia and several members of the Fellowship—their witnesses, folks who came to support them, Leah, our volunteer photographer—sat around a table in the Fellowship Hall eating cake. Ligia's and Miriam's was the fifth wedding that night, and the last one before Leah and I returned to our usual more deliberate way of doing weddings. Sitting around that table, we had the most wonderful conversation, full of laughter and reminiscing and incredible joy. I thought to myself: You know what? This is as good as it gets in the ministry. Soon I will no longer have experiences like this here, with people I love. This is a moment to savor and cherish. What a gift!

I will remember that conversation as well as the wedding ceremony moments earlier for a very, very long time. This was a time in my generally overwhelmed current state where grace knocked at the door and I heard the knock. I let grace in and sat down and had a piece of cake with it. My recent weeks of a little bit of scootching and more than the usual share of stalls and setbacks gave way and I moved forward. Hooray!

A final moment of grace from this past week... We're currently running a leadership development class. At the end of Tuesday evening's class, everyone was asked to share a response to this question: "What part of belonging to this faith community touches your spirit most deeply?" As we went around the room and each person shared briefly, I was tremendously moved by what I heard. This spiritual community is making such a deep and varied difference for so many people! The sharing that night was a great gift.

So, what are some of your big and small experiences of grace? How might you answer the question, "What part of belonging to this faith community touches your spirit most deeply?" I'm hoping we can share some stories during the Congregational Response.