

“Surprised by Grace”
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UUMSB
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Readings:

“Penitent’s Prayer” --Elizabeth Tarbox

It is an hour before sunrise. The waves keep coming, but each minute they make less progress than the minute before. As the tide goes out, the beach is exposed—a million pebbles just visible in the lifting of night, a periwinkle clinging to a rock, a horseshoe crab scrambling to catch the receding ocean—and I am expressed in all my hurts and frailties. My composure drains away with the tide, and the disheveled beach mirrors the ragged edges of my soul. The whole bay is my confessional, the breath of dawn my confessor.

I have been so consumed with my own hurts that I’ve forgotten to call a friend whose hurt is equal to my own. I put off doing those things that might bring healing to someone who is broken, or joy to someone who is at odds with the rhythm of life, because I cared more for my own loneliness. I refused the hand of one who reached out to me, clinging instead to old familiar ways. I chose to remain stuck inside a problem, rather than ask for help to resolve it.

I pray that some benevolent spirit has listened to my heart’s despair and judged me not. At the edge of the clouds a rim of cream appears. Night creeps away with my guilt beneath its cloak. Dawn sprinkles absolution, the earth has kept its promise. Forgiveness is at hand.

“When I Cried for Help” --Mary Oliver

Where are you, Angel of Mercy?
Outside in the dusk, among the flowers?
Leaning against the window or the door?
Or waiting, half asleep, in the spare room?

I’m here, said the Angel of Mercy,
I’m everywhere—in the garden, in the house,
and everywhere else on earth—so much
asking, so much to do. Hurry! I need you.

Sermon:

About a week after we moved to Northampton, we still had some cardboard moving boxes stacked in our backyard. Snow was in the forecast, so I wanted to be sure the boxes got to the recycling center before getting buried. On the day of the storm, I got home from work and the snow had already started and covered the grass. I hurried out back, stacked up the boxes and started to walk around the outside of the building to go to the recycling center, which is about a half-block away. As I rounded the corner, I slipped on a patch of ice under the snow. All of a sudden my feet were no longer under me, the boxes went flying and my legs flew up in the air just like a cartoon of some one slipping on ice. I landed right on my back. I got myself up and shook it off. I was grateful that I have good bones and that no one saw me fall in such an ungraceful manner. I gathered up the cardboard and went on my way with the first load. For the

second load of cardboard, I cleverly went around the house in the other direction, to be safe from the ice patch. On my way back from that trip, guess what happened? I slipped on a different patch of ice, slightly less like a cartoon this time, and landed on my backside. I was starting to get mad now. Why was there this ice everywhere, and on the grass for pete's sake? Why hadn't I reminded the kids to take care of the cardboard when it *wasn't* snowing? Why was this happening to me?? When I got back inside and changed into warm, dry clothes, I sat down and had a moment of realization, a moment of grace. While certainly not graceful, those times I fell on the ice were grace-filled. I realized how close I came to knocking my self unconscious, outside in a snowstorm, while home alone.

The classic understanding of grace has to do with unmerited favor from God. In the medieval Catholic Church individuals were able to purchase grace, in the form of indulgences, from the church. This was a major reason for the theological split with Protestants and for the Protestant Reformation in 16th century Europe. Martin Luther believed in a doctrine of "grace alone", and John Calvin called his similar doctrine irresistible grace. For both Protestant leaders what this meant was that there were those who were elect, and showered with God's grace, and those who were not. Our works (and very importantly to them, gifts to the Church) would have no impact on our immortal soul. Our eternal fate was decided by God and we could not know what our destiny was. If we were elect, we would be drawn to God whether we wanted to be or not. These ideas of predestination, and elect, or not elect people probably seem very foreign to our Unitarian Universalist experience. However, I will say that in their historical context, moving the people's understanding of salvation to be a direct relationship with God, rather than having the intermediary of the church, was a vital step in creating a climate in which liberal religion would eventually flourish.

When the American Universalists came along in the 18th century, they gathered particularly in opposition to this doctrine of irresistible grace and predestination. They believed that grace was poured out for all people. They believed that all were saved, not by works, or by grace alone, but by virtue of God's goodness. The first Universalists were Restorationist Universalists who believed that the choices we made in our lives, to help or hurt others, would influence how long we would spend after death mending relationships. In other words, those who led a virtuous life would be in communion with God all the faster, but *all* would have that opportunity for eternal relationship with God.

What do Unitarian Universalists today say about grace? In our grace note tonight, David Blanchard wrote, "The grace that leads us home will take many forms and will present itself in the guise of experiences we would never request. Grace just sneaks up on us and often steals away before we know what happened."¹ Grace is something over which we have no control. It is precisely those experiences that we do not plan for, and do not expect. That being said, our way of interacting with moments of grace are reflections of our spiritual practices and preparedness. If we are closed down and walled off from other people and from our environment, it would be very hard for moments of grace to break through to us. Grace amplifies our connection to community and taps into a power in the universe that can give us a little boost. When we are open to experience, we are more open to wonder, compassion, and gratitude, which often are part of our experience of grace. Grace can be an outside force offering flashes of insight to our connection and blessing to be alive. It can be a recognition of what power and love is there, even when we are not attentive to it.

¹ David Blanchard, "Amazing Grace" in *A Temporary State of Grace*.

So when I fell on the ice, twice, what is the Unitarian Universalist understanding of grace in that story? In some understandings of what happened to me that day, grace, and/or God was protecting me when I fell. But I believe the real grace was when I sat down on the couch and realized how lucky I was. That is what led me to greater connection with my family and the universe. Gratitude for the luck of how I fell, and forgiveness of my step-kids for not taking care of their chore before the snow started: that is the moment of grace.

Bad, horrible things happen in the world, and they don't happen because of a withholding of grace in the lives of people. Most Unitarian Universalists do not believe there is some cosmic bean counter that doles out limited grace, or takes it away for bad behavior. In people's lives, grace is the connection that helps *to bring us back* from the edge and from despair. In Elizabeth Tarbox's meditation we heard earlier, she is sad about issues in her own life and feeling guilty for being disconnected from her relationships and community. On the beach, she caught a glimpse of grace and felt reconnection. Tarbox connects with the natural world and through that experience, the grace of forgiveness. She will go back to her community and right her relationship wrongs. Grace pulls us back into relationship. It can soothe the individual and through that individual, a community.

Both Tarbox and Mary Oliver, in our readings today experience grace through their connection with nature. Tarbox writes, "My composure drains away with the tide, and the disheveled beach mirrors the ragged edges of my soul. The whole bay is my confessional, the breath of dawn my confessor. I pray that some benevolent spirit has listened to my heart's despair and judged me not. ...Night creeps away with my guilt beneath its cloak. Dawn sprinkles absolution, the earth has kept its promise. Forgiveness is at hand."² In "When I Cried for Help" Mary Oliver writes:

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The connection between these two readings is their connection to the earth. They experience a force in nature that is there to help them connect with what is of ultimate importance. Nature can surprise us with its beauty, and can help us to be open to grace when it appears. When we are centered, we are better able to catch glimpses of connection and grace. But, we don't need to be centered to experience it. That is what makes grace, grace. It is that force that brings us back when we are far from ourselves and our community. It can be both a comfort and can spur us into action and feeling.

Grace is part of the experience of people and creation. It is a manifestation of relationship and connection. In Mary Oliver's poem there is a reciprocal relationship between the person asking for help, and the Angel of Mercy. We ask for help, and we have need, but

² Elizabeth Tarbox, "Penitent's Prayer", *Evening Tide*, 17.

³ Mary Olver, *Redbird*, "When I Cried for Help"

also, as we are helped, we are given strength to help others. The Angel of Mercy needs Mary Oliver as she needs it. So it is with grace. We experience grace in our lives, and we are the grace in the lives of others. Sometimes our actions and presence are what helps another to be surprised into seeing their connection with the earth and with other people... a moment of grace.

I am so accident prone, that when I was in high school, my best friend ironically nicknamed me grace. I fall down stairs, up stairs, and on icy grass in my snow boots, as you now know well. But I am also a dancer. I was a folk dancer with the Mandala Folk Dance Ensemble, and in the Mexican Vera Cruz suite, I danced while balancing a water glass on my head wearing high heeled tap shoes and a five pound skirt. Physical grace is not all or nothing, nor is cosmic grace. We have glimpses of it, poking into our lives like the crocuses that will coming up through the grass soon. As David Blanchard wrote, grace, “will take many forms and will present itself in the guise of experiences we would never request. Grace just sneaks up on us and often steals away before we know what happened.”⁴

May it be also so with you.

⁴ David Blanchard, “Amazing Grace” in *A Temporary State of Grace*.