

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Amazing Grace”
Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins
November 29, 2009

Reading:

“Acceptance” by Paul Tillich:

Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? It does *not* mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Savior, or that the Bible contains the truth. To believe that something *is*, is almost contrary to the meaning of grace. Furthermore, grace does not mean simply making progress in our moral self-control, in our fight against special faults, and in our relationships to others and to society. Moral progress may be a fruit of grace; but it is not grace itself, and it can even prevent us from receiving grace. . . 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, 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 in our darkness. . .

Introduction

I thank Elizabeth Breeden for her help with this service. Her words about John Newton were especially important. Some of you may have been surprised about the comment that he was looked down upon for “hanging out with Methodists.” As a former Methodist, I understand this history. The Methodists were pioneers in England, and were criticized for praying extemporaneously, and out of doors, among other things. Some in my family said I was going to Hell for becoming a Methodist.

I have always appreciated the message of the Methodists when it comes to the concept of “grace.” For many of us the meaning of the word grace comes from the popular Christian hymn, “Amazing Grace.” You have probably heard the old joke about Unitarians. “They make poor singers, because they are always reading ahead to see if they agree with the words.” Fortunately, this joke is not as correct as it used to be, but many of us continue to have the problem. I am concerned if you approach hymns with this attitude we are not going to do well.

I am one step ahead of you this morning. Elizabeth already read the words for you. We are all familiar with the words:

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me?
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

If you read footnotes in the hymnal you already know they have helped us. They exchanged the word “soul” for the word “wretch.” This helps me a lot. It also helps me to know that Newton owned slaves and his experience of grace transformed his life. Like many of you, I have problems with a religion based on fear, a religion based on lost souls, blinded by personal sin. I want a more positive religion that recognizes my personal worth and dignity. I am not interested in a religion that begins with such a negative view of human nature. So I have always had problems with “Amazing Grace.”

The grace I would like to affirm this morning has three different aspects: It has to do with unexpected transformation, grace as belief in the interdependent web with wonder and awe, and finally, acceptance of oneself as a person of worth and dignity and potential for giving to life.

1. Grace as Transformation

First, grace as transformation. Let me tell you about one of the most moving religious experiences of my entire life. It happened at the Southeast UU Summer Institute in Radford, Virginia. The year was 1977. I was walking from the dorm to the dining hall. It was early in the morning about 7:30a.m. It was a misty morning. You could not see far in front of you. I was walking toward the dining hall, appropriately named, Muse Hall. On a campus of rather short buildings Muse stands tall as a skyscraper.

As I walked toward Muse I began to hear a faint sound. The closer I got the more distinct it became. It was the sound of bagpipes. At first, I did not know where it was coming from, but it became clearer and clearer. Someone was playing “Amazing Grace” on the bagpipes. As I got closer to Muse Hall I looked into the sky and saw the silhouette of the bagpiper on top of this tall building. I later learned it was Dick Scobie, Executive Director of the UU Service Committee, one of the Theme Speakers for the week.

At that moment as I walked across the college campus, I could not think of anything else, the food I was going to eat, the class I was going to teach, or the events of the day. All I could think about was this song. My eyes began to tear. Dick Scobie transformed a negative song into a positive feeling for me. This is a man who devoted his life to social causes, to the betterment of humankind, playing a song about transformation, about change and hope.

I later learned that “Amazing Grace” was written by a former slave-trader, John Newton. The transformation talked about in the song had to do with a change of heart about the institution of slavery. Newton became an outspoken opponent of slavery. Yes, I could agree, one can change. An evil heart can become a loving heart. Grace can be transformation.

2. Grace as Acceptance of the Interdependent Web

To look at grace in this way means that we see ourselves as part of something larger than ourselves, that we are related to that slave, or the person we once hated. Paul Tillich says it this way:

In the light of . . . grace we perceive the power of grace in our relation to others and to ourselves. We experience the grace of being able to look frankly into the eyes of another, the miraculous grace of reunion of life with life . . . We experience the grace which is able to overcome the tragic separation of the sexes, of the generations, of the nations, of the races, and even the utter strangeness between humans and nature. (p. 162, Shaking of the Foundations).

We liberals like to think of ourselves as self-reliant beings. We can make it on our own. We don't need others. We definitely don't need a transcendent being to guide us on our way. Well, our traditional view of being self-reliant individuals is being challenged. We must admit that some things come to us from outside us and we have no control over them. Again, I turn to Paul Tillich on this subject. He writes:

Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? It does *not* mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Savior, or that the Bible contains the trust. To believe that something *is*, is almost contrary to the meaning of grace. (P. 161)

What about addictions? How do we get them? We don't know. Psychologists tell us that we must begin the process of recovery from addictions by admitting that we have lost control, that we need help from a higher power than ourselves. I prefer to say that this higher power is outside of me but is also inside of me. I admit that I need help, that there are gifts that come to me, that I do not control. All I have to do is accept the gift. The gifts at times come from other individuals, from people I may not know, like the gift from Dick Scobie, that misty summer morning, or it may come from my wife or my grandchild. I experienced this gift after my accident last spring.

Yes, grace can come in many forms. David Armstrong, in an essay on grace, says the notion of grace embodies the element of unpredictability. He uses the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, and the writings of Loren Eiseley who talks about the irreducible mystery woven into reality, both scientists who use the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics to reveal a universe filled with paradox, uncertainty and unpredictability.

Our Purposes and Principles of the UUA support this view. It doesn't say we are self-reliant beings who do not need each other. Rather, it says we are part of an interdependent web of existence.

Grace is not necessarily magical in the traditional sense, of being outside the laws of nature. Rather, it is magical within the laws of nature. Yes, it may be unexplainable, and may even be mysterious. Yes, grace is transformation, it helps us to know that we are part of something larger than ourselves, and it can lead to a feeling of wonder and awe, as I experienced walking to Muse. You may have had the same experience at the Grand Canyon or some other marvelous part of nature.

3. Grace as Acceptance of Ourselves

A third possible meaning of grace is that of acceptance of ourselves even with our human limitations. Paul Tillich expresses it this way:

We experience moments in which we accept ourselves, because we feel that we have been accepted by that which is great than we. . .it happens that we receive the power to say "yes" to ourselves. . .peace enters into us and makes us whole. . .self-hate and self-contempt disappears. . .self is reunited with self. Then we can say that grace has come upon us. (P. 163)

Angela's Ashes

This view of grace was expressed in the best-selling book, Angela's Ashes, by Frank McCourt. Elizabeth is going to help me. This is a book about a young boy seeking some little bit of grace in a life filled with poverty, sickness, disease, death and self-punishment encouraged by the church in the Republic of Ireland. The book is filled with ideology behind hate, with religion that teaches children they are guilty and shameful.

The author, Frank McCourt, named after St. Francis, has finally given up on St. Francis. He couldn't help him with his guilt and shame, so he was ready to give up on the church. When he turned 16, he decided he needed to go confess his sins to the Jesuit priest. The only problem was he had to do what all good Irish men must do, drink his first pint. He went to the pub and they lined up the drinks. He drank himself silly. He got sick and in a drunken stupor he went to the priest. The priest told him to go away because he was drunk.

What Frankie wanted to do was deal with his feelings of being doomed the rest of his life for the sins he had committed. He is turned away again by the church, one of many times. He goes home to his mother. His mother who has lost her husband to the drink, is now afraid that her son is going down the same road, says, "Just like your father." She turns away. He follows her again and slaps her in the face "so that tears jump in her eyes and there's a small whimpering sound from her. She says, "You'll never do that again." He realizes what he had done and backs away having added another sin to his long list.

The next morning Frankie's mother, the ultimate forgiver, acts like nothing happened the night before. But Frankie can't forget it. He walks down Henry Street till the rain drives him to the Franciscan Church. Now that he is a man he wants to confess his ultimate sin. He wants to tell St. Francis that he has lost his faith. He goes to where St. Francis stands with his birds and lambs. He says, "I look at him and wonder why I ever prayed to him. No, I didn't pray. I begged." St. Francis didn't do him any good. He still lost those he loved while Francis stood there on his pedestal with a little smile, the birds, the lambs and he didn't care about Frankie and Theresa, his first love who died of consumption.

Now Frankie has lost faith in St. Francis. He can throw off that childhood faith. My favorite passage in the book is Frankie telling St. Francis off. He says:

I'm finished with you. St. Francis. Moving on, Francis. I don't know why they ever gave me that name. I'd be better off if they called me Malachy, one a king, the other a great saint. Why didn't you help Theresa? Why did you let her go to Hell? You let my mother climb to the loft. You let me get into a state of doom. Little children's shoes scattered in concentration camps. I have the abscess again. It's in my chest and I'm hungry.

St. Francis is no help, he won't stop the tears bursting out of my two eyes, the sniffing and choking and the God of Gods that have me on my knees with my head on the back of the

pew before me and I'm so weak with the hunger and the crying I could fall on the floor and would you please help me God or St. Francis because I'm sixteen today and I hit my mother and sent Theresa to Hell. . .and I dread the millstone around my neck.

Now Frankie experiences grace, maybe for the first time in his life. Here is what he says:

There is an arm around my shoulders, a brown robe, click of black rosary beads, a Franciscan priest.

My child, my child, my child.

I'm a child and I lean against him, little Frankie on his father's lap, tell me about Cuchulain. . .

My child, sit here with me. Tell me what troubles you. Only if you want to. I am Father Gregory.

I'm sixteen today, Father.

Oh, lovely, lovely, and why should that be a trouble to you?

I drank my first pint last night.

Yes?

I hit my mother.

God help us, my child. But He will forgive you. Is there anything else?

I can't tell you, Father, I can't.

But you could tell St. Francis, couldn't you?

He doesn't help me anymore.

But you love him, don't you?

I do. My name is Francis.

Then tell him. We'll sit here and you'll tell him the things that trouble you. If I sit and listen it will only be a pair of ears for St. Francis and Our Lord. Won't that help?

Frankie tells St. Francis his story. The sins of his father. His sins. The sins of the world that trouble him. The Jesuit brother who closed the door on his face. He told St. Francis about his getting drunk and slapping his mother. Father Gregory says:

Would you like to sit and be silent, perhaps pray a few minutes?

His brown robe is rough against my cheek and there's a smell of soap. He looks at St. Francis and the tabernacle and nods and I suppose he's talking to God. Then he tells me kneel, gives me absolution, tells me say three Hail Marys, three Our Fathers, three Glory Be's. He tells me God forgives me and I must forgive myself, that God loves me and I must love myself for only when you love God in yourself can you love all God's creatures.

It is here that Frankie experiences grace. He has someone tell him he must forgive himself. Before he leaves, he must ask one more question:

What about Teresa? Is she rotting in hell? Father Gregory answers: "No, my child. She is surely in heaven. She suffered like the martyrs in olden times and God knows that is penance enough. . ."

Are you sure, Father?

I am, my child.

He blesses me again, asks me to pray for him, and I'm happy trotting through the rainy streets of Limerick knowing Teresa is in heaven with the cough gone. (pp. 341-343)

In this story I find the faith that I have always had and never lost. It is a faith that there is grace in life as we find acceptance of our being, when we are reunited with ourselves and others, or when we feel at one with

the universe. It can be a time when we have been alone or lost, and now are found. Paul Tillich talks about it coming to us in the darkness. He writes:

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 try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!* 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, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but *acceptance*. (p. 162)

How many of us have had this experience, and can remember in our lives when it came? I can. It was when I was young and growing up and someone said to me: "Morris, you have special talents." On that day I experienced grace. Or it may have been when someone showed us that we are loveable, that we are valued as a human being, a person of worth and dignity. Grace comes with unconditional love. We don't earn it. It is given without demands. Grace is something that should come to each child that is born.

As such it is Amazing Grace. Doesn't it have a sweet sound as bright as the shining sun or as cool as the falling rain? May we all find this grace, as we walk toward our destiny, looking for our muse, our guiding light, our inward strength, accepting the fact that we are accepted, sometimes being transformed unexpectedly, finding our place in the universe, experience wonder and awe in the interdependent web. Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a soul like me.