

## Settling for Grace

Preached at the South Nassau UU Congregation; July 6, 2014

Yesterday, my husband and I went to see an art exhibit in Williamsburg. We knew going into it that it was a popular exhibit and so got there right when it opened in hopes of avoiding the line. Alas, everyone else seemed to have had the same idea. We didn't actually see the front of the line before we got in it because we approached from the back, so it was anybody's guess how far the line went. In the hour and a half we waited to get in to the exhibit, I remembered two important facts about myself:

1. That I hate waiting in line.

And 2. That the reason I hate waiting in line is because I hate not being in control.

In that hour and a half, there was absolutely nothing I could do to speed up or slow down the line. There was nothing I could do to make the sun go behind the clouds when it started getting hot or stop the obnoxious alarm that kept blaring away.

Like so many part of our lives, it was all simply beyond my control.

I am not alone in my desire to maintain control. As Nadia Bolz-Weber pointed out in our first reading, we Unitarians Universalists in general tend to not deal well with not being in control. We like to believe that we can do anything, that we alone are responsible for creating a more just and peaceful world, for example. When we look around at the world and it doesn't seem to be what we want it to be, we are comforted by "our own divinity or awesomeness"—at least that's how Bolz-Weber interprets our theology: that our own high aspirations for what humans can do is our source of comfort and strength.

In some ways, she is right. We do believe that the beloved community is not going to build itself. We do believe that we can be agents of positive change in our world. And we do believe that our agency is one of the keys to ending injustice and oppression in the world.

But where I think Bolz-Weber gets it all wrong is in her impression that this theology means that we no longer have or have need of any conception of grace. Grace and self-reliance may be at odds with one another at times, but they can also coexist just fine.

The traditional definition of grace is "the free and unmerited favor of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and bestowal of blessings." A lot of that traditional definition might seem to be outside of our theological comfort zone, but if we strip it down, we get something that I think we can all understand: "free and unmerited favor...as manifested in the bestowal of blessings."

Have you ever experienced a blessing that feels "free and unmerited"? Have you ever been in the midst of one of those dark moments of your life, and suddenly been touched by someone or something that lightens your load or lifts your heart?

These are moments of grace. Grace is a gift, freely given and freely received. But, as theologian Paul Tillich says, “grace is more than gifts. In grace something is overcome; grace occurs in spite of something; grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement. Grace is the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself. Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected. Grace transforms fate into a meaningful destiny; it changes guilt into confidence and courage. There is something triumphant in the word grace: in spite of the abounding of sin, grace abounds much more.”

The real problem with the traditional definition of grace is that it offers a false dichotomy: we are the source of sin and God is the source of grace. Grace fixes sin. God’s grace makes sure that our sin is not the last word.

The story that Kate Braestrup told in our second reading problematizes all of that. It is a story about grace, and yet there is no sin, and God doesn’t even make an appearance. Instead it is a story of sorrow and mourning—of the pain that comes when you lose a loved one. And it is a story of love—of the love that comes up like a wave to comfort and stand by us when we are struggling. It is a story about a moment of grace—about a moment when tears and love and a pan of hot brownies were the first of many reminders that even in her grief, Braestrup was not alone.

This, I believe, is central to our experience of grace: the experience of knowing that we are not alone; the experience of understanding ourselves as a part of something bigger, as held by something larger than ourselves, as not having to do it all by ourselves. This is an experience that I would bet we all have had at some point or another, but is one that we continue to struggle with as Unitarian Universalists. It just doesn’t line up with our need to understand the world rationally. It doesn’t fit in with our desire to be in control. Grace doesn’t necessarily fit in to an ordered, controlled view of the world, and yet it is something that we all need.

My senior year in high school, I was in a Catholic praise music band. It was perhaps not a typical thing for a UU teenager to do but, truth be told, I loved the music. I remember standing up there singing during Mass thinking to myself, “man, I don’t believe a word of what I am saying...but I kind of wish I did...”

It was not the language of “Jesus loves me and I love him” that I found compelling, but the assurance of grace. No matter how tough life may seem, we don’t have to do it alone. We are held and loved, nurtured and strengthened, guided by an invisible hand on our journeys through life.

It was so very different from the staunch self-reliance that I had learned about in UU Religious Education, where we read stories about great men and women who had done great things to make the world a better place. These were people who had worked long and hard to do good—and, as far as we were told, had done it on their own.

Rather than learning that there was a higher power that we could count on to guide us, hold us and be with us, we learned about the Unitarian ideal of self-improvement. We were fully responsible for our actions, and for making ourselves into more whole, and more perfect human beings. We were fully responsible for working to heal our broken world.

What a task! It often felt to me that the weight of the entire world was on my shoulders. Somehow self-reliance and self-improvement got translated in my head to mean that I alone was somehow responsible for changing the world, and that self-improvement to the state of perfection was somehow a necessary, and yet seemingly impossible task.

It is no wonder that I found the messages of grace in those Christian praise songs so compelling.

What those Sunday School teachers forgot to teach us--and perhaps this is because it is not something that can be taught--is that even if there is no higher power to guide us, we are not alone on this journey we call life. We are not alone in our striving to become more whole as individuals. We are not alone in the struggle for justice and peace. We are not alone in this world.

Our faith tells us that we are not single, solitary souls, walking this path with no one beside us. Human beings are inherently relational, inherently connected. And even if there is no higher power to hold us, guide us and comfort us—even if there is no higher power to offer us those moments of grace, we can be the grace for one another. We can hold one another and guide one another and comfort one another. We can show up on the doorstep with tears and love and brownies.

In fact, the hardest part about grace is not being on the giving end. We know how to show up for one another. It is being on the receiving end. It is letting go enough to know the experience of grace. It's about giving up that tight control we sometimes have on our lives and making room for something bigger than ourselves.

I know this is the hardest part for me.

This past Wednesday was the five-year anniversary of the death of one of my dearest friends. We gathered on Wednesday night—those of us who had been close to Katie—to mark the anniversary together, and to share memories—to make sure we hadn't forgotten. The memories started slowly and I know I was feeling nervous—not sure how much I wanted to hear, not sure how much I wanted to share, not sure how much I wanted to remember. I knew I wanted to be there for the others, but did I want to be there for me? But somewhere in the middle, something broke me open—something broke all of us open—and the memories flowed freely. There were a few tears, a lot of laughter, and an abundance of love. It was a grace-filled evening—once I had the courage to open myself to that grace.

In some ways, grace is a one-way street. We certainly don't do anything to earn it or deserve it. Grace just comes to us, tapping us on the shoulder, offering brownies, memories, love—reminding us that we are not alone. Grace interrupts our broken lives, surprising us with love, filling in the cracks of our pain with healing and hope.

But grace does require our participation too. Grace cannot come to us if we are wedded to control. It cannot come to us if we are holding too tightly to our own ability to change the world.

It requires us to leave ourselves open and a little vulnerable. It requires us to say yes. It requires us to learn how to receive.

As Unitarian Universalists, grace can be our good news too.

Grace is not limited to a worldview that says simply that people sin and God forgives. Yes it is true what Tillich says, that there is something triumphant about grace—but it is not limited to its triumph over sin. It is true that “in spite of the abounding of sin, grace abounds much more.” But this is also true: In spite of the abounding of pain, grace abounds more. In spite of the abounding of sorrow, grace abounds more. In spite of the abounding of suffering, grace abounds more.

And it is true that grace can come from God—or from some mysterious source that we don’t understand. But it can also come from the neighbor with whom we’ve only spoken ten words, from the friends who surround us, offering memories and love, from the religious community that holds us in our pain and guides us in our search for truth and meaning.

Grace is not about being in control, no matter how much we might like to be. It is about opening ourselves to receiving that which is unearned, that which is freely given. When life spins wildly out of our control, sometimes all we can do is settle for grace—and hope that it comes to fill our cracks with healing and love. May we all open our hearts to the grace that abounds.