

Will and Grace

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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Reading

Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*

We do not even have a knowledge of sin unless we have already experienced the unity of life, which is grace. And conversely, we could not grasp the meaning of grace without having experienced the separation of life, which is sin. Grace is just as difficult to describe as sin. For some people, grace is the willingness of a divine king and father to forgive over and over again the foolishness and weakness of his subjects and children. We must reject such a concept of grace; for it is a merely childish destruction of a human dignity. For others, grace is a magic power in the dark places of the soul, but a power without any significance for practical life, a quickly vanishing and useless idea. For others, grace is the benevolence that we may find beside the cruelty and destructiveness in life. But then, it does not matter whether we say "life goes on", or whether we say "there is grace in life"; if grace means no more than this, the word should, and will, disappear. For other people, grace indicates the gifts that one has received from nature or society, and the power to do good things with the help of those gifts. But 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.

Sermon:

Will or grace. Of the two hymns we sang this morning, which theology resonates for you? Is it grace, the unmerited and uncontrolled blessings we receive from whatever source, that provides help and comfort in times of trouble? Or is it will, our own intentional human effort, that provides solace and salvation when troubles wait at every turn?

John Newton, the author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*, was very much of the mind that only an undeserved gift from an all-powerful and all-seeing god could save him in his time of trouble. This reflects his experience and his belief. The author of our second hymn, however, seems to be of the mind that his own internal strength and the support of his human community is what will bring him through the many dangers, toils and snares of life. Which more closely expresses your view? Or do you think there might be a more nuanced answer, more than an either/or choice?

These two forces, will and grace, run through our entire lives. They bring us again and again to fundamental questions of how existence is structured and what level of control we exert in our

own lives. It is the dance of perception: reality or illusion, divine intervention or dumb luck, calculated odds or serendipity, the winds of fate, the vagaries of fortune or the good old Puritan work ethic.

While you can never ascribe one set of beliefs to all Unitarian Universalists, I would guess that most of us live primarily from the “will” side of the argument. Indeed, I would say it is part of the American culture to believe that by the exercise of steadfast will we prosper. We achieve through hard work, and doing the right thing brings us good things. In this worldview, our achievements – whether we see them in terms of status, material success, community recognition, health, happiness, or peace of mind – however we see them, our achievements are the result of our effort. Study hard – get a good grade. Get a good grade – get a good job. Get a good job – become successful. Eat right, run three miles a day, meditate and be kind to animals and small children and you have it all.

But what about when things go badly? What about when you do all you can and never get the right break? What about the people who eat right, run three miles a day, meditate, act kindly to all living beings and have a heart attack at 42? We may hold tightly to the belief that our hard work pays off, but we are less likely to see our misfortunes as being of our own making. Bad stuff just happens. Good stuff we create, bad stuff just happens.

Flip that around and consider its opposite, a world ruled by grace alone where good stuff just happens with no intervention from us and the bad stuff we bring on ourselves through our own shortcomings. It’s not that attractive a theology is it? Yet why would it make any less sense? Either we create our own good and an evil universe is out to get us, or we are unable to get out of our own way and a benevolent universe keeps saving us from ourselves. I find neither option either comforting or logical. It does not make sense to me that the source of action is determined by how much I like the outcome. So are we to choose between will and grace – everything is of our doing alone or everything is beyond our doing – or might we seek a more sophisticated model that makes room for will and grace in a way not delineated by whether we are happy with the outcome? And if we are to make room for both, how do we, as Unitarian Universalists, as theists, deists, non-theists, atheists and agnostics, how do we understand the word *grace* when its dictionary definition is “unmerited *divine* assistance given humans for their regeneration or sanctification” and it is generally understood to be conveyed through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross?

Gordon Kaufman, a liberal theologian, offers a worldview wherein people exert agency within a universe of serendipitous creativity. I just really like saying “serendipitous creativity,” but Kaufman’s theology also really works for me. The “creativity” part of his theology acknowledges that there are forces beyond human agency responsible for the formation of the natural world of which we are only a part. The “serendipitous” part of this theology says that the universe has no moral agenda behind its creativity. Flowers were not formed to delight human spirits any more than smallpox was unleashed to plague us. Tsunamis are not the tool of some vengeful god punishing a fallen humanity nor are bountiful harvests a reward for adherence to god’s law. All creation, however perceived by human scales of good and bad, fairness and injustice, simply *is*. It is without moral judgment or educational intention. It just is. Good stuff

happens, bad stuff happens. Within this model is the possibility of grace. The serendipity of Kaufman's creative force may bring us hardship, but surely it also conveys blessing.

But grace is one of those terms that everyone has a slightly different definition. Rather than discard any one meaning, theologians have, over the centuries, codified them into a complex structure of graces that range from common grace to universal grace. I imagine that common grace is what we most often think of when we speak of grace – all the beauty the world has to offer, the blessings of earth that sustain life, the comforts of companionship. But in the passage I read earlier, theologian Paul Tillich argues for a more radical definition, one that offers both transformation and salvation. This is a grace that we do not experience often in our lives, though Tillich argues that it is always available if we choose to be receptive of it.

It is something we cannot force to happen, nor is it something that happens when we think we have no need of it. But in our times of deepest pain and restlessness we might just experience a grace that comes like a wave of light breaking through a heavy and obscuring darkness. Tillich writes, "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 seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!'"

This is the same feeling and sense of John Newton's words in the hymn *Amazing Grace*, that feeling of being lost and then being found, feeling you are outside the circle of compassion and finding acceptance. Tillich and Newton were separated in time by some 200 years and their theologies, their concepts of divinity, was light years apart, yet they shared this common knowledge that most human beings share of knowing what it feels like to be lost and then to be found again. Not to find your way (an act of will), but to be found through no intentional act of your own.

This is where, I think, a lot of Unitarian Universalists struggle with or reject this kind of grace, the salvific kind rather than the common kind. Traditionally and generally, Unitarian Universalists have held a pretty high opinion of the nature and capabilities of humankind. We tend to put ourselves in the center of creation and trust in ourselves to solve its problems. We are not in need of salvation, in need of grace, because we are not wretches. Look right there in the hymnal where you are offered the notation option of singing "soul" rather than "wretch" for we are not wretches. This kind of exalted view of humanity and hopeful theology has little room for the concept of a transforming grace. This kind of exalted view of humanity and hopeful theology has its good points – heavens knows I rejected John Calvin and his view of humanity as lowly worms long ago – but this exalted view also denies the reality that we are indeed capable of wretchedness, that we, at times, act in ways of deep disconnection from life, that we know the wretchedness of separation from love and all sacredness. Yet we do indeed share that common experience of the pain of life, its loss and its lostness. And we do know the healing, saving, transforming power of the reunion of life with life.

But I want to offer an observation that is somewhat at odds with Paul Tillich, with John Newton, with many others who write about grace. I do not believe that grace, or at least our most

powerful experiences of it, need occur only when we are in the depths. I believe we need to have experienced those depths to recognize and accept grace, but we do not have to be there and only there when we know the spiritual transformation that brings us home to ourselves and assures us of acceptance. For me, the most powerful experiences of grace came at times when I was relatively OK. One was my call to ministry, and it came certainly out of a lostness about my purpose in life and a crisis of being without direction, but it did not occur during a time of despair or crisis, but rather later after I had achieved some level of patience with the search for what I was called to do. You could easily argue that the grace occurred at the turning point when I began to have hope, that that was when a seed of grace was planted. But my experience of anything powerful enough to be transformative did not occur until much later. Another such powerful moment came during a decidedly joyous moment on my very first Sunday serving a congregation. As I took my seat in the chancel facing the congregation, I looked out at the people and knew “these are my people, I belong to them and they to me, we are irrevocably one.”

The Catholic monk Thomas Merton describes a moment of grace very similar to this. In his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he wrote:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another, even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, a world of renunciation and supposed holiness... This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words; “Thank God, thank God that I am like other men – that I am only a man among others.” ... As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

Grace strikes us in varied ways, at different times, in places as sacred as temples and as mundane as the corner of Fourth and Walnut. But grace always transforms, I would say “something,” Tillich would say “everything.” Perhaps it is this diversity of experience yet commonality of experience that brings such a variety of voices to speak of grace. Just here I have offered an 18th century Anglican, a Catholic monk, an early 20th century German existentialist and a late 20th century professor of theology. Might as well toss a 21st century Unitarian Universalist minister into the mix. UU minister David Blanchard writes in his book *Temporary State of Grace*, “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... Grace is something you can’t demand. Grace is sometimes beyond understanding. But from time to time it pays each of us a visit.”

So how about you? Has grace ever paid you a visit? Has there ever been a time in your life when you knew what it was to be lost, when you knew what it was to be wretched, to experience deep disconnection from others, from self, from life? And at that time perhaps a seed was planted that later flowered into an experience of grace, or perhaps it hit you full blown at the time of deepest

pain. But something you did not will into being assured you that you are accepted, that you are a part of the universal and sacred wholeness of existence, that you are as vital as any other part and that you cannot be separated from it. I wish this for you as much as I wish you the knowledge of the inestimable power of your own will. For it would be a poor preacher who spoke to you week after week about ways we might live with integrity yet did not believe in our power to make that happen. So my wish for you is some will *and* some grace for as our friend Dick Watts writes, “Whether for us the breakthrough comes as we look up at the stars, ponder the mysteries of DNA, find someone who loves us, help heal another’s hurt, or take a risk for justice, the experience of being accepted restores us to ourselves.” {Richard G. Watts, *Hungers of the Heart*}

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.

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