

"Will and Grace"
The Rev. Terasa G. Cooley
Neighborhood UU Church
January 30, 2022

Invocation

From the Gospel of Thomas

For this pattern which I give you today is not hidden from you,
And is not far away.
It is not in heaven, for you to say, "who will go up to heaven and bring it down for us,
So that we can hear it and do it?"
Nor is it beyond the sea, for you to say, "Who will cross the sea and bring it back for
us,
So that we can hear and do it?"
But the teaching is very near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart,
So that you can do it.

Prayer

[Katherine Mosby – *Book of Uncommon Prayer*]

[God of my struggling heart:]
Deliver me to myself / that I may stop / fretting the hours in vain,
Looking for what's lacking / always elsewhere and otherwise.
Let me befall the peace / which drops like wind, / suddenly, between ...
shadow and sky, the hush / like the intervals of quiet / between questions, /
the sorrows of one season and the next, / swift and sure and sharp / as grace.
....
Hone my gaze / to the riches / of detail -- / slight as the fur / on a bee's belly /
Or the veins, thin as breath, / lining a forgotten iris / translucent / as a wing -
Rewards / the hasty eye / and anxious heart / do not recognize.
....
Heal my impatient heart / which burns within me like a canker.
Teach me not to be annoyed / by faults which buzz
In my ears as loudly as mosquito wings.
Help me to love the small, the damaged, ... without sorrow.
Fill me with understanding / as a pear tree fills with wind -
Touch my leaves, let my blooms shake down

And cover those I love with love.

Help me to laugh / with so much heart / I shake the trees
And tremble the quiet / pools. Surprise ... the warblers with my joy.
Multiply my delights / till they surround / me like an echo
Revolving / in a gorge.

...

Grant me hope / the measure of a mote / and my spirit will rebound:
This love / will burnish / the air as if etched / in lightning ...
For I have come / so long without / a sign / into my path
Shed moments / like the shake of leaves in handfuls / ripe and random,
A little grace / the comfort / of this gift.

Reading from *Will and Spirit* by Gerald May

As a society, we are convinced that if we can only learn enough, become strong enough, and work hard enough, we can impose peace and fulfillment upon ourselves and everyone else. But the actual condition of the world and of our own hearts refutes this. Something else is needed: some source of inspiration, some reservoir of power and wisdom beyond that which is provided by our personal wills. We need something that can balance willfulness with willingness, something that can temper our harshness with love.

... the human mind has become objectified as a thing to be fixed, altered, streamlined. Bad feelings are to be eradicated with the utmost efficiency. Good feelings are to be maintained and amplified. All of this of course leads us to feel less and less natural and increasingly contrived. We come to feel as if we are our own creations; we are "man-made," and therefore fundamentally and essentially different from the rest of creation. This is liable to increase our alienation and existential discomfort, which in turn makes us work even harder to alter ourselves. There is still a slight hint within us that something natural and basic might be truly good, but even here we often feel that the only way toward naturalness is to construct it, to make it happen.

The hunger for experiences of meaning and belonging has fueled great movements of "pop" psychology and religion. Many of these approaches have been unsound psychologically and theologically, and they frequently support willfulness, but they do offer experience.

... But these are extremes, and while they are attractive to some people, countless others are trapped in a middle ground. Their common sense prevents them from believing that the answers to life's questions can be had through a series of dramatic experiences or by joining any specific group. They search not for instant illumination but for a direction toward the truth. They seek depth rather than a succession of highs, and a true integration between experience and intellect rather than a confused excess of one or the other. Still more basically, they *may* sense that in some way fulfillment – if it comes at all – might have to come as a gift rather than as an accomplishment.

Sermon

A few weeks ago I asked 10 of my best women minister friends to join me in an online spirituality retreat. We used a format that was developed by Jan Richardson, whose beautiful poems you have heard me share from time to time. The theme was responses to grief, which certainly felt timely to me. And it was truly lovely. We read poetry, we listened to music, we listened to one another, and we prayed for one another. I realized afterward that it was a great balm to my spirit which had been feeling quite dry and crusty recently. In the last few years, while I have had more time to myself than I could have believed, I haven't really been taking time *for* myself. Time to slow down, to listen to the spirit, to be open to grace.

And what do I mean by saying "open to grace?" In my sermon on forgiveness a few weeks ago I talked about forgiveness being an act of grace, rather than an act of will, and any number of you asked what I meant by an act of grace? It's a good question, and I will try to explain, though the explanation will wander a bit through my understandings of spirituality, of prayer, and of God.

The poet Katherine Mosby said: "The way to grace is unique and ineffable; it is more likely to be intuited than explained. Much of what attracts us to the spiritual is its mystery, its ability to elude language. It is not surprising then to find language more often getting in the way than showing the way. Perhaps that is why some of us more readily make a connection through the senses – a sight or smell, a piece of music or work of art. The oblique approach occasionally finds access the direct one can't. ..."

I've talked before about this being one of the reasons I often use poems for our meditations. For to me, poetry offers just this kind of indirect route to a more spiritual way of understanding things. Reading poetry forces me to listen in a different way. It makes me slow down. It helps me be aware of my deeper responses to words, rather than my reactions to them.

I remember one of my first encounters to this way of understanding poetry. It was in a college course on poetry and I came across the poem "Sunday Morning" by Wallace Stevens

What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty

Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

This was certainly a revelatory way of thinking about Sunday morning that I had not been introduced to. Growing up in the Bible Belt, so much of my understandings of religious language revolved around the conservative and traditional. But maybe there was more to religious and spiritual language than I had previously thought. What if being aware of “all pleasures and all pains” as Stevens describes it really is a way to experience grace?

Instead of thinking about grace as a gift from an omnipotent God, I began to see grace as something we experience when we let go of our need to control everything. As Gerald May tries to get at in our reading this morning, maybe our way to experiencing grace is being open, rather than sure of ourselves, to let ourselves *experience* something rather than try to *manipulate* it.

Even the avowed atheist, Albert Einstein once wrote: “The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. [The one] who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle. It was the experience of mystery – even if mixed with fear – that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms – it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man.”

Understanding grace this way means that we have to admit that we are not in charge of everything and that there is more to life than just the concrete, knowable things. Thinking about it this way means opening up some new pathways to a different understanding of the concept of God.

In a previous sermon I explored my path in coming to the realization that I believed in God. I won't repeat the journey but suffice it to say it was not a straight line. It required me to go through some difficult places, psychologically and spiritually; I experienced things I cannot explain, and ultimately realized I didn't need to. It was a process of recognizing that I am not God, of reminding myself that I really am not fully in control of anything, and that much of life is mysterious, and, as scary as that can sometimes be, that mystery can offer a greater source of fulfillment than much that is concrete. Thomas Moore put it well when he said: “it's ... clear that some kind of spirituality arrives only after profound struggle and emotional entanglements, that perhaps rises like a clear sky after a dark and stormy rain. Rilke says that God has

to be mined from the earth as we stoop over in the underground shaft of our personal strivings and difficulties.”

My professor of theology at Harvard, the late Gordon Kaufman, helped me see the concept of God in a completely different way. Kaufman said that in whatever form it may take in various theologies, the concept of God is important because it both relativizes and humanizes. In other words, that it does two, rather opposite things simultaneously: it helps us understand that we are not the center of the universe, that we are relative to all other things. And that we are all beautifully and uniquely human.

All religions find their own balance in this paradigm: some emphasize mostly the relativity - the conservative traditions that ask for obedience and conformity. Others, like our UU tradition, place a lot of emphasis on the humanity, the recognition that each of us has something unique and special to offer to the world. But if we only emphasize uniqueness we lose sight of the ways in which we are all connected, that we are responsible for one another, and that we need one another. And, in my view, that there is something more than just our concrete consciousness. A recognition that there is a mystery at the heart of the universe.

William James put it this way: “[O]ur normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness,... No account of the universe in its totality can be final [if it] leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.”

When I lose sight of this for myself, I get to that dry and dusty place that I talked about in the beginning. When I fall into the dreariness of the everyday, concrete busyness, I am all too prey to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. But, ironically, giving in to the powerlessness, holding ourselves in the emptiness, allowing mysteriousness to take root, can ultimately feed our souls and rejuvenate our spirits.

I think this is why I am so captivated by the theory of Emergence that Adrienne Maree Brown espouses. It asks us to bring our vision both down and out. As she says: “Emergence...is another way of speaking about the connective tissue of all that exists – the way, the Tao, the force, change, God / deus, life. Birds flocking, cells splitting, fungi whispering underground. Emergence emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and the mind.”

For me, developing this awareness is what I call prayer. And allowing myself to sit in prayer is to open myself to the gift of grace. The kind of prayer I’m talking about is not about asking God for something, but sitting in the kind of expectation that allows a deeper experience of life to creep in.

You may not call it prayer, and you don't need to. You may not be able to use God as the reference point or a way of understanding connection and mystery. I believe that grace does not need a definition of God to enter.

So this is about as definitional as I can be about what grace and spirituality mean to me. My meandering around in this sermon makes it clear to me that some things simply defy definition. How to explain something that has changed my life, made it deeper, broader; that has filled me at times to the very brim with joy, and made me feel hollow to the very core with my own emptiness; how to define that which has left me gasping at my own power and my own insignificance all in the same moment. How to paint a picture of that which has paralyzed me with fear and disappointment in myself, and which has lifted me up and enfolded me with unnameable love.

Surely this is what we all seek at some level, whatever we call it, whatever religious or non-religious language we use. Surely this is what we are called to do in the world: to find the beauty and meaning within ourselves, to receive by giving to others, and to connect to the spirit that moves within us and around us and among us that is the source of all life. That spirit that I call grace.

So may we water the dry parts of our spirits and revivify the beauty of our souls. As Katherine Mosby said so beautifully in our prayer:
Grant me hope / the measure of a mote / and my spirit will rebound:
This love / will burnish / the air as if etched / in lightning ...
For I have come / so long without / a sign / into my path
Shed moments / like the shake of leaves in handfuls / ripe and random,
A little grace / the comfort / of this gift.

Benediction - Rabindranath Tagore

Let Your love play upon my voice and rest on my silence.

Let it pass through my heart into all my movements.

Let Your love, like stars, shine in the darkness of my sleep and dawn in my awakening.

Let me carry Your love in my life as a harp does its music, and give it back to You at last with my life.