

Sermon TUMC – March 19, 2017
Lent 3 – Exodus 17:1-7, John 4: 5-42

CREDO: Faithful Moorings – Grace

Michele Rae Rizoli

Today, as part of our series on faithful moorings, it falls to me to talk to you about grace. Well, actually, it didn't fall I chose this topic because I see grace as one of the most essential markers of a community that seeks to follow in Jesus' footsteps and to live as an instance of God's reign.

And I want to call us to this – a very modest proposal – to be a church where grace is a marker of who we are together.

[I've noticed a lot of people talking about their dogs, lately – I have nothing against dogs – but they talk about all the unconditional love they get from their dogs. It's actually not unconditional, but I won't get into that. It speaks to a hunger for unconditional love. Wouldn't it be great if people came to a church because that's where they could find unconditional love? – you may also have a dog, that's OK.]

A little-known fact about our renovation, is that until this past week, there was a spot just outside the cloak room where if you stepped on it just the right way it would open the north door of the building. Just like that. We'd be going to the photocopier and all of a sudden the door would mysteriously open, even it was locked. That's how I feel preaching about grace, I was just going about my business and a door opened up and I'm curious and intrigued. There is so much to reflect on about grace and so many implications for how we understand it. Please come with me, I have so much I want to say. (This is why there will be many links and footnotes to this sermon!)

What comes to your mind when you think of that word “grace”?

- Is it the movie and TV cliché of a lone bagpiper playing Amazing Grace. So cliché yet so beautiful
- A fiery preacher from your past talking about being “SAVED BY GRACE!”?
- Or is it those prayer cards we have for saying grace before meals?
- Or is it an early Anabaptist called Pilgrim Marpeck¹ who argued that we inherit from Adam and Eve “original grace” as part of our human condition? – that was a trick question, I know you wouldn't think about that.

Grace is one of those intangibles of our faith language, a churchy word that is perceived as a very positive thing, but it turns out we might each understand it differently depending on our theological heritage. So come with me, we need to do a little investigative work before we proceed.

¹ “The first condition of man [sic] was a perfect covenant relationship with God. God made all things good; sin came in by man's [sic] choice, that is, conscious disobedience (88-89). Marbeck accepts the notion of original sin, but only alongside of an original grace, and the crucial moment of this twofold heritage is not physical birth, but the point at which each man [sic] becomes accountable. “
https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq/18-1_012.pdf

“The New Testament words for grace sometimes denote forgiveness (Luke 7:42; 2 Corinthians 2:7, 10) or favor (Romans 11:5-6; 2 Timothy 1:9; Hebrews 4:16) bestowed upon the undeserving. At other times, they indicate a living, transforming energy (Acts 4:33; John 1:14-17; 1 Corinthians 15:10; 1 Peter 4:10). Differences in theological understandings of grace often arise from regarding one or the other of these meanings as primary.”²

When I asked a group of Mennonite women theologians for their understanding of grace, I got slightly different definitions. Each of them placed grace within relationship: God looks on us with grace (as opposed to judgment) and so we look on others with grace.

Grace does not appear as a standalone concept or doctrine in the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective³ (nor in many other creeds, as far as I know). Grace is an underlying assumption, an idea that runs through the confessions.

I did a little unscientific search of the word in the COFMP and I found some interesting results:

- The first time grace is mentioned is in relation to God’s character: “God’s abounding grace and wrath against sinfulness are perfect in righteous love.”
- The next time it appears is in the article about sin where we are told God’s grace gives us free will.
- Then in the article about salvation, where we learn that “we are saved by God’s grace, not by our own merits.”
- This grace of God’s is also what we celebrate when we gather to worship (in the article on the Church) and what we are grateful for when we celebrate The Lord’s Supper.
- Then grace makes an appearance in the article about church discipline: where we read the following.” “We practice discipline in the church as a sign of God’s offer of transforming grace.” (*Really? How has that been working? I wonder how many recipients of church discipline have experienced it as grace?*)
- It also appears when the COFMP talks about discipleship, among other things it states that “through grace, God works in us to recreate us in the image of Christ, himself the image of the invisible God.”
- Sadly, there is no mention of grace in the article on CHURCH ORDER AND UNITY – but we’re going to put it in there today.
- Then finally in the article about Peace and Non-Resistance we read: “We give our ultimate loyalty to the God of grace and peace, who guides the church daily in overcoming evil with good, who empowers us to do justice, and who sustains us in the glorious hope of the peaceable reign of God.”

Among our theological ancestors, the Anabaptists, grace was primarily understood as a transforming power: “Through grace God had created the world from nothing, and

² <http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Grace>

³ <http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/cof/intro>

would recreate people almost entirely anew. This understanding lay behind the Anabaptists' lofty behavioral standards."⁴ If grace is a creative divine activity it also transforms a person's daily actions. The early Anabaptist's approach expected God to change us, to regenerate us (they also expected to undergo suffering in this process, and they did).

My critique of how this has all played out in our Mennonite church culture, in my own experience and observation, is that calling on grace in mostly negative contexts and connecting it so closely with "lofty behavioral standards" and church discipline has distracted us from grace. God's grace – which was meant to be what motivates and enables us to live and see things differently in the world — has taken a back seat. The high behavioral standards, which are easier to pin down, have become front and centre. The over emphasis on right living is like a restricting girdle that makes us look thin, rather than actually being thin or than accepting that we're not thin and moving on from there. **I am not against right living, but it all starts with grace.**

Another thing that I see (and experience even in my own assumptions about grace) is that we've mostly lost the idea that God's grace has the power to transform us. We think of our efforts at right living as originating in our own desire to live rightly and justly. If we just try hard enough, we'll get it right. We can sometimes act as though we can do this building of God's kingdom without God's or without each other's help. We forget that grace is the enabler and motivator of our Christian life.

Or we forget about transformation all together and fit grace into a mainstream and by now cultural notion where God is only able to be gracious to us because Jesus died on the cross to pay some sort of price. This thinking says that sure, God is gracious to us, but only because Jesus died. Sure we need to be gracious to each other, but only because God is gracious to us. Grace is reduced to a transaction, not part of the essence of who we are together as God's presence in the world. (That opened up another door, the atonement sermon, for another time.)

As one author states the problem: [This way of seeing grace] uses a language of compassion and love, but its own internal logic turns being Christian into a life of requirement and rewards, thereby compromising the notion of grace. Indeed, it nullifies grace, for grace that has conditions attached is no longer grace."⁵

One of the theologians I polled defined grace this way: "I think grace is a relational word and points to the kind of relationship we have with each other arising out of the kind of relationship exhibited by God toward us. It is away of "seeing" the other!" (Lydia Harder)⁶

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Discovering a Life of Faith*

⁶ Here are some other definitions:

The gift of grace (and it is always a gift) does more than forgive, absolve or cleanse; it transforms and empowers us to let go of the past and to become more fully the person we've been created to be. That changes everything, including how we relate to others and inhabit the world. (Muriel Bechtel)

Another of these theologians said the following: “I see Grace as a free gift of God that no one has the power to control. And we are invited to participate in receiving that grace as well as sharing it with others by joining with God in wholeness making (shalom/salvation) relational way of being and activities. (Susan Kennel Harrison)

What might change if we return our focus more fully on God’s free grace? God’s empowering grace? God’s no-strings-attached love and regard for humanity, indeed God’s image of grace that formed us?

When we gathered a couple of weeks ago for our first session on the Restorative Path we are now, after a year of struggle disagreeing on right behavior, of wondering how to respond to different understandings of faithfulness to God, different leadership styles, different working notions of integrity, of compassion, of covenant, and after many affirming and some hurtful conversations, many of us called for grace at that meeting.

I deeply affirm that. We need grace. What exactly were we asking for? What exactly are we offering?

Let’s turn for a moment to the two stories we’re heard in our lectionary readings. There is so much in them, so we are just going in quickly – that’s my hermeneutic for this morning, I’m just going to find what I want and bring it to you.

In Exodus 17 we have an account about conflict, mistrust in leadership and doubt about God’s leading. The question it poses is “Is the Lord among us or not?” Let me put it right out there that I’m reading this today with all its metaphorical connotations – any resemblance to church conflicts real or imagined is intentional.

Also, we talk about faith as a journey and deserts in faith jargon are places of trial and desolation – just keep that in mind.

This congregation of freed slaves, thousands of people travelling in the dessert, had come up against a very primal and legitimate need – water. And when needs become primal, so does anger and frustration, it is “fertile soil for despair or feeling abandoned by God.”⁷

Their next instinct is resort to nostalgia, “things were better back then” no matter how awful they really were – in this case slavery and genocide. Sometimes the security of a horrible past seems better than an uncertain future. And their next instinct is blame – it’s all Moses’ fault for changing the status quo. And finally they ask where is God in all of this?

Our mutual co-operation with God, which empowers nonviolent resistance to systemic sins (racism, (hetero)sexism, classism, etc) and peace building as creating life-giving communities which embody equality, hope, and peace. (Susie Gunther Loewen)

⁷ Waldermar Janzen, *Exodus, Believers Church Bible Commentary*

Then God hears the people and gives Moses direction on how to access the water they need. He strikes the rock and swoosh, water. I wonder did he lop off a chunk of rock, or was it a crack that started slowly and then water eventually came gushing out?

What's interesting is that there's another account of this same story of Moses striking the rock, in Numbers. In that story whoever is telling it thinks he got it all wrong. They criticized Moses for doing exactly what he did here even though he did the same thing he is praised for here. So the moral of that story is that sometimes when you're in leadership you just can't escape criticism!

Anyway, God' sends the water they need, in the case of this sermon, the grace. In commenting about this passage, OT scholar Waldemar Janzen says "Again and again, Christians through the centuries have experienced that God has been unexpectedly near in situations of inner and outer wilderness. Let us look for God's presence expectantly when such situations arise!" I agree with Waldemar.

In this story, grace *did* appear, in the form of water, in the form of rescue, in the form of basic needs being met. May we have faith that the pattern holds for us in our current journey as well.

The thing is, we may not always experience God's grace in such an obvious and overwhelming way. Here's something I learned about the desert when I had the opportunity to be in the desert of Judea for a retreat. I happened to wake up before dawn and I went for a walk. I noticed that there were a lot of bugs crawling around. It turns out that they were scurrying to fetch up the droplets of dew that had accumulated during the night before the sun would dry them all up.

Big overwhelming gushes of water – or grace – can't be expected all the time in the desert, sometimes you need to scurry around and collect any droplets you can find. Big surges of grace might also not be easy to come by, especially from other people. We may need to work at keeping our eyes open and collecting droplets of grace towards each other in our wilderness. Stay tuned for small movements, small acts of kindness and reconciliation, and collect them for your nourishment going forward. Expect something small.

Now to Jesus and the Samaritan woman. It's hard to approach this story without what one author calls the "interpretive litter" that has clouded how we hear it. But remember, today in the texts we're looking for grace that applies to our current context.

Whoever the gospel writer was, they included this story to provoke some thought about the animosity between Jews and Samaritans. These folks were longstanding adversaries, each claiming God's favour for themselves, each claiming that their theological interpretation, their way of worship was the true one. Jesus approaches this Samaritan woman, purposefully, at Jacob's well, a place laden with symbolic meaning, and talks to her about what really matters – not being on the right side, but

recognizing God. As in the previous passage water serves as a symbol of God's sustenance, living water God's free gift, God's grace.

Some readings of this account set up the woman as somehow sexually promiscuous, though it would be equally as likely that in that cultural context she had been abandoned, widowed or was economically bereft. Let's not rush to conclusions. To quote Gail O'Day: "when we read [these verses] carefully, we notice that the history of the woman's five husbands is presented quite disinterestedly, with no suggestion of coloring of moral outrage or judgment. How or why the woman has had five husbands... was not a concern of the Evangelist as he tells the story. More importantly, those questions are also unimportant to Jesus. One searches in vain for any words of judgment about the woman's character uttered by Jesus in these verses."⁸ So one way of reading is that grace was to come into a situation of conflict and offer no judgment (and to accept hospitality from enemies).

But here again, I want to expand a bit on the story to make a further point about grace and adversaries (I could have said enemies, but we Mennonites don't like to think we have any!). You'd think this applies to someone else, let's just say it applies to me.

In social psychology there is something called attribution error, I am going to oversimplify it (for a fulsome and accurate description you can look it up on Wikipedia, or on a video link I'll post with my sermon). Basically, attribution error understands that in default mode, when something goes wrong we humans explain our own behavior as being because of the situation and someone else's behavior as part of their disposition or character. So if I am walking down the street and I trip, it's because there's a crack in the sidewalk. If my adversary is walking down the street and trips it's because they are clumsy.

See what's going on? We don't assess what we're seeing clearly, we attribute things based on the relationships we have with the person. "With friends and allies we attribute the good things they do to a disposition and the bad things to situation.

With enemies and rivals it's the other way around. It's hard to get them out of the enemy box, any thing bad they do we take as further evidence, anything good we treat as inauthentic."⁹

As we journey towards restoration of whatever has been broken in our midst (it's different for different people), as we journey towards wholeness/salvation, whatever you want to call it, let us be aware of this human tendency in how we perceive other people. We are in the midst of a conflict also in the wider church (whether we like calling it that or not) apparently over LGBTQ issues but it is about so much more. As we live in this context, the only way to try to overcome this bias in how we perceive others is through grace. The grace we can muster through intention *and* the transforming grace that God enables. It's an amazing grace, it's a grace that saves us.

⁸ Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels*.

⁹ <http://meaningoflife.tv/videos/38090>

In conclusion, I'd like to tell you about my grandson. Actually, it applies to all infants. Have you ever noticed how they look at at people? They go through a phase where finding a face to look at gives them pure delight and they look right at you, right into your eyes. Adults don't usually do this, to be looked at in this way is powerful stuff, as many have discovered.¹⁰ Author Kathleen Norris imagines that God's grace is just like this kind of look that a baby gives. She says: "God looks at us, staring into our face in order to be delighted, to see the creature [God] made and called good, along with the rest of creation... [God] can look right through whatever evil we've done in our lives to the creature made in the divine image."¹¹ We all carry that divine image.

What might happen if we become a church where this kind of grace, this kind of compassionate and essential way of looking at each other becomes a marker of who we are together?

Grace and peace to you.

¹ SUMMARY

14. We practice discipline in the church as a sign of God's offer of transforming grace. Discipline is intended to liberate erring brothers and sisters from sin, and to restore them to a right relationship with God and to fellowship in the church. The practice of discipline gives integrity to the church's witness in the world. (Summary)

17. We believe that Jesus Christ calls us to discipleship, to take up our cross and follow him. Through the gift of God's saving grace, we are empowered to be disciples of Jesus, filled with his Spirit, following his teachings and his path through suffering to new life. As we are faithful to his way, we become conformed to Christ and separated from the evil in the world.

GOD

God's awesome glory and enduring compassion are perfect in holy love. God's sovereign power and unending mercy are perfect in almighty love. God's knowledge of all things and care for creation are perfect in preserving love. God's abounding grace and wrath against sinfulness are perfect in righteous love. God's readiness to forgive and power to transform are perfect in redemptive love. God's unlimited justice and continuing patience with humankind are perfect in suffering love. God's infinite freedom and constant self-giving are perfect in faithful love.⁷ To the one holy and ever-loving triune God be glory for ever and ever!

SIN

Sin is part of the human condition; we all participate in it. The sin of Adam and Eve affects all (Romans 5:12, 19); at the same time, we are held accountable for our own behavior. As the Anabaptist leader Pilgram Marpeck wrote, any heritage we have received from our first parents does not deprive us of our own final responsibility before God (Ezekiel 18). Although human beings have free will, choice is limited. By the grace of God, we have been given the freedom to choose the bond of covenant relationship with God or to choose bondage to sin (Romans 6:16-18), which leads to final separation from God. The Scriptures issue stern warnings that those who do not fear God, but persist in anger, lust, power mongering, and the like, face the destruction of hell (Matthew 5:22, 29; 18:9). See "The Reign of God" (Article 24).

SALVATION

From the beginning, God has acted with grace and mercy to bring about salvation--through signs and wonders, by delivering God's people, and by making a covenant with Israel.¹ God so loved the world that, in the fullness of time, God sent his Son, whose faithfulness unto death on the cross has provided the way of salvation for all people.² By his blood shed for us, Christ inaugurated the new covenant.³ He heals us, forgives our sins, and delivers us from the bondage of evil and from those who do evil against us.⁴ By his death and resurrection, he breaks the powers of sin and death,⁵ cancels our debt of sin,⁶ and opens the way to new life.⁷ We are saved by God's grace, not by our own merits.⁸ (See more)

CHURCH

The church is the assembly of those who voluntarily commit themselves to follow Christ in life and to be accountable to one another and to God, while recognizing that the church is imperfect and thus in constant need of repentance. The church's identity as God's people of faith is sustained and renewed as members gather regularly for worship. Here the church celebrates God's boundless grace, reaffirms its loyalty to God above all else, and seeks to discern God's will.

¹⁰ vide Marina Abramovic "The Artist is Present." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OS0Tg0IjCp4>

¹¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*

LORDS SUPPER

The Lord's Supper points to Jesus Christ, whose body was given for us and whose shed blood established the new covenant.² In sharing the bread and cup, each believer remembers the death of Jesus and God's act of deliverance in raising Jesus from the dead. As we relive this event with a common meal, we give thanks for all God's acts of deliverance in the past and present, for the forgiveness of sins, and for God's continuing grace in our lives.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE (see above)

No mention of grace in CHURCH ORDER AND UNITY

DISCIPLESHIP

Through the gift of God's saving grace, we are empowered to be disciples of Jesus, filled with his Spirit, following his teachings and his path through suffering to new life. As by faith we walk in Christ's way, we are being transformed into his image. We become conformed to Christ, faithful to the will of God, and separated from the evil in the world.

Through grace, God works in us to recreate us in the image of Christ, himself the image of the invisible God.

PEACE AND NON RESISTANCE

We give our ultimate loyalty to the God of grace and peace, who guides the church daily in overcoming evil with good, who empowers us to do justice, and who sustains us in the glorious hope of the peaceable reign of God
