

GRACE – ALWAYS GRACE
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University Congregational Church
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**Reading: The Rev. William Ellery Channing's sermon,
*Unitarian Christianity Most Favorable to Piety***

“Now, this grace or mercy of God, which seeks the lost, and receives and blesses the returning child, is proclaimed by that faith which we advocate with a clearness and energy which cannot be surpassed. Unitarianism will not listen for a moment to the common errors by which this bright attribute is obscured. It will not hear of a vindictive wrath in God which must be quenched by blood; or of a justice which binds his mercy with an iron chain until its demands are satisfied to the full. It will not hear that God needs any foreign influence to awaken his mercy, but teaches that the yearnings of the tenderest human parent towards a lost child are but a faint image of God's deep and overflowing compassion towards erring man.”¹

Grey soggy clouds hugged the earth on a Friday morning several years ago. The dull skyline met the rich green of winter wheat that waved across the field to barren oaks and maples. The windshield wipers flapped a different rhythm to the song my five-year-old Emily sang in the back seat. “B-I-N-G-O, B-I-N-G-O, B-I-N-G-O, and Bingo was his name-o.” A gentle but persistent rain pitter-patted against the canvass awning that sheltered the entry way to the preschool. Emily snuggled her cold hand into mine. “Daddy is warm,” she said.

¹ William Ellery Channing, “Unitarian Christianity Most Favorable to Piety,” *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1886), p. 395.

A half a world away a car bomb exploded in Iraq killing civilians and Iraqi police. American soldiers were ambushed killing some and wounding others. In the Darfur region of Sudan refugees were dazed in the memory of genocide. Burmese villagers fled to the mountains to hide from the military that would rape and kill their children while looting and burning their homes and shops.

This past week families traveled to spend the Thanksgiving weekend with their kinfolk. They returned to the family farm or old neighborhood. Sisters, brothers, aunt, uncles, and cousins embraced for the first time in a long time. Gathered around the table they marveled at the 20-pound turkey, pecan dressing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, sweet potato soufflé, green beans and ham, biscuits, and pumpkin pie. After dinner some of the family gathered around the television to watch a football game. Children climbed up into the attic to rummage through old trunks filled with memorabilia while others played in the back yard. Teenagers disappeared to God knows where while their mothers bragged about the latest grade point average, scholarship, award, or trophy. Photographs were passed around and the latest gossip floated through the company.

The teens were talking about the interesting stuff: the marijuana bust, the missed period, the latest X box game, and dad's layoff from the plant. Grandpa and his sons gathered in the barn to inspect the new tractor, or in the garage to examine new power tools.

When the day was over a mound of dishes filled the sink and counter tops. Mother insisted that she would take care of it all after everybody went home. She just wanted to spend time with her family. Turkey bones and piecrust had fallen out of the top of the kitchen trashcan. It wouldn't have been so bad if Uncle George had not brought that yapping Chihuahua. He can't seem to go anywhere without that overgrown rat. People feigned complaint that they ate too much. The opined that mother looks a little more frail than last year, and hadn't cousin Shirley put on the pounds since last spring? And why does Dad insist on buying wine in a box? After the three-hour drive home promises will be made that next Thanksgiving will be different. Maybe we'll stay home and have a quiet holiday with the immediate family and take our dinner at the Holiday Inn turkey buffet.

Meanwhile, standing over the kitchen sink scraping dishes and rinsing them, grandmother sighed at the joy of having seen

everybody. She will worry about the failures of some and smile at the victories of others. And she will think that her life has been blessed, even though she caught a whiff of cigarette smoke and knows about the marijuana bust, the missed period, the latest X box game, and the plant lay off. Her hearing is never that bad.

In the images of a rain soaked Friday, did you see the green winter wheat, did you hear the BINGO song, and did you feel a child's warm hand? Or did you get stuck somewhere in clouds and rain, death and genocide? In the Thanksgiving image did you feel the warm embrace, taste succulent food that was lovingly prepared, and talk about old times and new ideas? Or did you resonate more with family tension, dirty dishes, and the dread horror of the holiday season? Let me share an image offered by the poet Richard Jones. I really like this poem. It is titled, "After Work."

“Coming up from the subway
into the cool Manhattan evening,
I feel rough hands on my heart –
women in the market yelling
over rows of tomatoes and peppers,
old men sitting on a stoop playing cards,
cabbies cursing each other with fists
while the music of church bells
sails over the street,
and the father, angry and tired
after working all day,
embracing his little girl,

kissing her,
mi vida, mi corazon
 brushing the hair out of her eyes
 so she can see.”²

Is your life so burdened with rough hands, women yelling, and cabbies cursing – so grimed with fatigue and anger – that your heart no longer thrills at the vision of your children? Are your lips so cracked and dry that you cannot smack a big juicy kiss on his or her cheek and say, “My life! My love!”

Oh, I understand the problem. We are so consumed with work, commitments, and responsibilities. We need to install a bigger memory chip in our palm pilot to keep up with all that we must do. We have professional lives and children to groom. Perhaps we are also caring for our parents. There is no one who works as hard as we do, who is so unappreciated, misunderstood, taken for granted, and put upon. And of course you can't get good help these days. It's a wonder that most companies are still in business. The whole world is an insane asylum and the lunatics are in charge! If only people would get out of my way, pay attention, and do as they are told my life, indeed the whole world, would run as scheduled. Stephen Dobyns put it in his poem, “Confession.”

² Richard Jones, “After Work,” *Good Poems*, selected and introduced by Garrison Keillor, (New York: Viking, 2002), p. 183.

“The Nazi within me thinks it’s time to take charge.
 The world’s a mess, people are crazy.
 The Nazi within me wants windows shut tight,
 new locks put on the doors. There’s too much
 fresh air, too much coming and going.
 The Nazi within me wants more respect. He wants
 the only TV camera, the only bank account,
 the only really pretty girl. The Nazi within me
 wants to be boss of traffic and traffic lights.
 People drive too fast, they take up too much space.
 The Nazi within me thinks people are getting away
 with murder. He wants to be boss of murder.
 He wants to be boss of bananas, boss of white bread.
 He wants them to wash their hands, sit up straight,
 pay strict attention. He wants to make certain
 they say yes when he says yes, no when he says no.
 He imagines everybody sitting in straight chairs,
 people all over the world sitting in straight chairs.
 Are you ready he asks them. They say they are ready.
 Are you ready to be happy? he asks them. They say
 they are ready to be happy. The Nazi within me wants
 everyone to be happy but not too happy and definitely
 not noisy. No singing, no dancing, no carrying on.”³

We are trapped by the demands and exigencies of life and
 responsibility. We are frustrated and even angered by the fact that we
 cannot control all that is pressing upon us. Let me tell you the truth.
 When we are so desperate to control our career, our marriage, our
 children, our club, or our church we are seldom happy! It is a
 religious reality – a theological fact – that God gave us children and
 puppies to frustrate our impulse to control. That is the same reason
 why God gave preachers to congregations and vice versa! Did you

³ Stephen Dobyns, “Confession,” *Good Poems*, p. 268.

ever wonder why there is crabgrass, or dandelions, or mosquitoes? It is because somebody loves you so much that they wanted to warn you that you are not in control. So take a deep breath and lighten up. Listen to the BINGO song, eat Oreo cookies with a child or grandchild or borrow the neighbor's kid.

There are certainly a great number of things to be worried about in this life. Even if we can manage our control issues there are real worries about war, terrorism, the economy, and flu vaccines. Just because we are not in control does not mean that we are not concerned about such issues nor are we free from responsibility for them. But I think for most people the challenge is not concern or compassion. The challenge is to see the green winter wheat on a wet fall day, to hear the mother singing in the kitchen, and to taste the turkey. We are never going very far in life without an encounter with chaos, evil, confusion, and even death. It is also true that you do not have to go far in life without an encounter with grace, love, forgiveness, and hope. The question is, can you see the grace in the midst of life's muck and ooze? The point is not to avoid what is painful and ugly. The point is to comprehend that which restores and nurtures human beings in the swell of suffering.

I believe that all things are in the Sacred presence. All things are in God, if you will. There is nothing that happens in life that happens outside holy witness. No child is born or butchered beyond the pale of God's charisma. Continuing from the reading this morning of Channing's sermon, we find these words:

“ (Let us) see the inexhaustible plentitude of divine grace; and aided by revelation, we sees this attribute of God everywhere, both around us and within us. We see it in the sun which shines and the rain which descends on the evil and unthankful; in the peace which returns to the mind in proportion to its return to God and duty; in the sentiment of compassion which springs up spontaneously in the human breast towards the fallen and lost; and in the moral instinct which teaches us to cherish this compassion as a sacred principle, as an emanation of God's infinite love.”⁴

The Source of life is within us and we are constantly swimming in the tidal pool of life's Source. There is always grace if we will but see it. There is always grace if we will be its agent.

I am reminded of the story of the Jews in Auschwitz who were forced to watch the hanging of seven other Jews. One was a fourteen-year-old boy. The floor doors opened and the bodies dropped, breaking their necks and asphyxiating them. Their bodies writhed and twisted for a few torturous moments.

One witnessed spat, “Where is God now?”

⁴ Channing, pp. 395-396, adapted to be gender inclusive.

Another pointed to the dead boy at the end of the rope, “God is right there.”

God would hang with Dietrich Bonhoeffer at Flossenburg prison. The Sacred One would walk through many gas chamber doors, nude and frightened, but compassionate enough to hold her neighbor in comfort as gas was pumped through showerheads. There is always grace if we will but see it. There is always grace if we will be its agent.

I hope you understand that I am not talking about optimism or encouraging you to find a silver lining in every cloud. I do hope you hear the word that grace is abundant, however grim and dire the circumstances. I am not talking about cheap grace, or triumphant grace, or militant grace. I am talking about the grace that often goes undetected, is seldom celebrated, and is frequently misunderstood.

I have a very dear friend who recently sought to establish himself as the residential custodial parent of his two children. The children had been living with their mother who had remarried. Their new home quickly proved to be dysfunctional, with substantial evidence of psychological abuse, perhaps even more. As you know, changing custodial residency is a very difficult to process in family

court. It requires substantial amounts of time and money. The effort placed a great strain on my friend's own marriage. The good news, if it can be called good news, is that the psychologists who interviewed all of the parties involved concluded that the children were best served by living with their father. The bad news is that the court chose not change custodial residency.

My friend was devastated. He had worked hard to do the right thing. Throughout the entire process the truth and the children were manipulated and distorted by his former wife and her husband. There were moments when his children were alienated from my friend. He had been forced to take money from his pension fund to pay legal fees. But when it was all over his very best intentions, efforts, and resources did not succeed in accomplishing the right thing.

I offer this story as one more example of grace at work. It is grace unrequited, but grace nonetheless. His children can never know the lengths their father went to protect them. He will never recover the time and money he invested. I know my friend was wounded by this terrible ordeal. Who knows what scars he and his current wife endure for his effort? But none of these things can deny

the fact that he was an agent of grace. He could not control the circumstances or the outcome. But in Channing's words he emanated the "sentiment of compassion which springs up spontaneously in the human breast towards the fallen and lost."

Regardless of the theological or philosophical language that you use to describe your faith, it seems to me one of the primary functions of a religious community is to bear witness to grace. Yes, we can all very easily identify the problems, the problem people, the things that are wrong, and the things that need to be improved. We can get angry about the things we cannot control. But I think our first responsibility is to know grace when we see it, however measured and far away, however miniscule and even weak. We are called to be agents of grace even when Uncle George brings his yapping Chihuahua to the Thanksgiving dinner and dad serves wine out of a box. Who knows, maybe grace is bringing a fine bottle of wine to the next family reunion.

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