



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Amazing Grace

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Now I don't want to disappoint all of you too much but I need to begin this sermon with a confession and ask for your forbearance, if not your forgiveness. I take my job very seriously, and being your minister is both an honor and privilege. I have come to really love you and this congregation over the past six years, and I have tried to uphold the tradition of excellent ministry here and to live up to our ideals as Unitarian Universalists.

We are all flawed creatures, in need of help and forgiveness, and healing. I left the Lutheran church of my youth in part because I experienced more judgment than mercy, more condemnation than acceptance. It makes the title of the sermon more poignant than I had expected. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me ...

So, well, this is hard to say but I did not watch live coverage of Will and Kate's wedding at 2:00 am Friday morning. I wanted to, and I imagined most of you did, and I had thought that it would be a wonderful moment of communal experience – you in front of your TVs and me in front of mine, watching the royal wedding. And, Kate comes from a long line of British Unitarians – her great grandparents were active and she is related to James Martineau, a well know Unitarian philosopher and hymn writer of the 1800s – sigh.

But, no. A moment of grace slipped by, and we are left with the consequences.

The news is filled with pictures and stories of the awful devastation in the South of the US after the series of tornados. Frank's use of Sara Teasdale's poem 'There will be stars' has these lines:

There will be stars over the place forever;  
Though the house we loved and the street we loved are lost -

Our thoughts and prayers are with them. Kathe grew up in Xenia OH which was devastated by a huge F5 Tornado in April 1974. I have seen tornados in Minnesota from a distance – they are terrifying.

And war rages around the globe; the environment is not cared for as it should, and there is an all out war on the poor and women in our politics. Not satisfied with having vilified and destroyed ACORN [a wonderful organization that worked to get those who rarely vote to vote] the target is now Planned Parenthood. If there is an organization in this country that deserves praise and support, it is Planned Parenthood. A leading politician recently accused them of racism and eugenics! Maybe the royal wedding is not so bad ...

It makes you want to yell 'Mayday! Mayday! After all, today is Mayday – though the distress call has nothing to do with the date – it is the Englishified version of the French – help me 'm'aidez!'

So, moments of grace in the midst of all of this are welcome. Watching two people very obviously in love make a commitment to each other is not all that bad. And the hats were great!

Mayday – international labor day, a day that was set aside to honor the protection of workers – celebrating the eight hour work day. Here is a religious message for all of you overachievers in this congregation – work no more than eight hours every day – sound good? A day to honor unions and, maybe especially now, to affirm the importance of unions.

And Mayday – Beltane in Celtic terms, the pagan festival of a turning from death to life, from winter to spring and summer, a time to celebrate the newness of the earth, to see regeneration, to worship the organic. Frank's music today expressing the loveliness of this world in his just beautiful music.

Grace – how sweet the sound. Interesting word – grace. We're gracious, graceful, gratitude. We say a grace before meals; Lutherans are saved by grace alone. Hemingway said that courage is grace under

pressure. We speak of the grace of an athlete or a dancer, of how graceful Grace Kelly was, or – well you pick your favorite – Gwyneth Paltrow or Sam Snead’s golf swing, the way Henry Aaron swung a bat, or on and on.

There but for the grace of God go I. We are saved by Grace alone.

It is our theological theme for the month . So what is the theology of this? I am greatly indebted to a talk Bill Schulz gave years ago and a portion of which I had kept and read this morning – Bill was then president of the UUA, later head of Amnesty International, and is now head of the UUSC – he will be here for the first weekend in December.

Let me go back to the Lutherans, because that is where my religious journey began. I was taught, in no uncertain terms, that the only way to salvation was by belief – sole fide, Luther said - Faith alone, in his words. **But**, according to that happy German, I could not by my own reason or strength, believe -- a quandary that Luther solved by claiming that faith itself, that belief itself, was a gift of God’s grace. Neat, isn’t it? It sets up an absolute dependency on God.

The Hebrew Bible, of course, had it differently. Salvation – whatever that might mean – was earned by human action. It meant following the commandments. For the prophets that meant doing justice and loving mercy; for the priests it meant following liturgical law. In the end, though, we earned our salvation, arguing that we are capable of just that and so accountable for our fate.

The Apostle Paul turned that message upside down; he was convinced of our utterly depraved nature – the good that I would do, I do not, but the evil I would not do, I do – he said. For Paul, there was simply no way we could earn our salvation; hence the need for the crucifixion and resurrection and the focus on grace. From this the various doctrines of predestination came.

Catholics took a middle road; both faith and works are needed. For Protestants, it is – as Luther said – faith alone. And faith itself is an undeserved gift. This did not seem right to me – I couldn’t even believe? It made no sense – why try? It all seemed arbitrary and false.

Unitarians and Universalists were bothered by this as well, and they took different approaches to the problem. The Universalists simply did away with damnation and hell – everyone was saved. The Unitarians took the Pelagian view – Pelagius was an early theologian who believed in the possibility of human perfection – and said that we could grow, in Channing’s phrase – in likeness to God

So grace, for Unitarians has nothing to do with faith – we believe we can believe and we believe we can act. It is not that we are perfect in any sense, but we are not dependent on God for salvation. This, by the way, is at the heart of what Melville is getting at in Moby Dick.

So what is grace for us? Bill Schulz suggests, and I agree with him, grace is more closely related to the idea of grace in the Hebrew Bible and is related more to the idea of grace as graceful rather than an undeserved blessing, though there is that to it as well. Saul and David are said to be endowed with grace, as is Esther, the queen of the book of Esther, and the suggestion is that grace is a sign of charisma, that special quality the gods – as in Greek myth -- or God – as in the Hebrew Bible give to certain men and women. There is a physical quality to it – again Grace Kelly.

And it is in those moments when we perceive grace or experience it, that God appears, or, as we might more often say, the sacred appears, what is holy appears, the transcendent appears. Not just in humans but in moments of our lives:

Around the year 1240, King Louis IX of France bought the crown of thorns. This was one of the most precious relics in all of Christendom and it carried great power. The very crown Jesus wore when he was crucified, it was an object of immense veneration.

He was a religious man, and so he bought it - at an exorbitant price. He then needed a place for the crown and he built, in the middle of Paris, near the Seine, a chapel where the crown could be housed. The crown cost \$200,000 then - St Chapelle cost only \$40,000 to build! [not in today's money - that was then]. We, for example hope to finish the courtyard by the RE buildings with a labyrinth and memorial pavers this summer and will have a fund drive for that in about a month. [It will cost around \$60,000 - no crown of thorns in it though - just a labyrinth with a mosaic of a flaming chalice in the center].

St. Chapelle is gorgeous. Have you been there? Like Notre Dame, it has buttresses on the nondescript outside so the interior space is unencumbered [now there is a metaphor for our lives, isn't it?], and the walls of the upper chapel are nearly all stained glass. At one end is a rose window. Just up by the altar is a small room when King Louis used to sit. He was pious and from this room could worship in peace. There is a lower chapel of painted walls and a low ceiling. A narrow staircase leads up to the main chapel. It is magnificent.

Saint Chapelle sits surrounded by the Justice Department of Paris. Once inside the upper chapel, and on a sunny day, well, something happens.

My family -my wife and I and our two girls- got there mid-morning. It was sunny out. This was in the year 2000. I had been there before, but when we all walked into the chapel, our eyes met this feast of light and color. There are chairs around the perimeter so people can sit and look. Most chairs were taken but it was not overly crowded. Next to me were four Americans who talked and talked and talked, even though the room asked for silence. It was a place to be in the presence of God, not talk about people from your hometown or last night's meal.

Finally they left, and very shortly thereafter, music appeared out of nowhere. A recording of a woman's choir singing chant, and for some few moments, no one talked. For a few moments, the chapel became, again, a place of worship and not a tourist site. For a few moments, a deeper silence, born on the voices of the women's choir, entered the room and the people there. No one talked. No one talked.

Up above us and just around to our left, the sun was shining through the windows. The color in the glass is deep - especially the blues and the reds and we sat there, for at least an hour, watching the sun track slowly across the room. The shafts of light were visible in the ancient dust of the chapel air -- red and blue and yellow hues. On the floor appeared spots of blue and red from the light.

I got up and went over, put my hands out and got some of the blue light, then brought it over to my family. I got a little more and put some in my pocket [and saved it for rainy day!]. Soon Kathe and our girls got up and we were catching bits of blue light, holding the light in our hands. Lots of people smiled, though I don't remember anyone getting up as we did.

It was a moment of grace, a reminder of how beautiful the word can be, and how even more beautiful when the beauty is shared.

These moments happen when we lower the drawbridges we have between ourselves and the world, when we open our hearts to joy and beauty, even in the midst of sorrow and tragedy. These are the moments of grace. And so maybe there is something about the undeserved gift notion of grace - these moments are not earned, but are received as gifts.

Gifts of grace, in both the ordinary and the extraordinary, gifts of grace, of beauty. When we see the grace in others - I watch all of you on Sundays and there is indeed a great deal of grace in this room. And the

moments of grace in the world – there is plenty to go around. Bits of blue light, snatches of music that stir the soul, the light through trees, ten fingers, ten toes etc.

Amazing grace indeed ....

Readings

'Against Drawbridges' Mario Benedetti

'When the Gracious Appears ...' Rev Bill Schulz