

**29<sup>th</sup> January 2023**

**Grace – Ann Kader**

Opening music

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Violin duet - Amazing Grace

Chalice lighting

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We open ourselves to worship today.

May the peace of this house bring us calm.

May the joy of this hour make our hearts glad.

May the challenge of this hour awaken our courage.

May the communion of this hour confirm our togetherness.

1st hymn purple book

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No.147 Spirit of Earth, stone and tree

Funny and a little irreverent story about Grace told by Father Thomas Lane. Author is unknown.

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A man decided to skip mass one Sunday and head to the hills to do some bear hunting. As he rounded the hills to some bear hunting on a perilous twist in the trail, he and a bear collided, sending him and his rifle tumbling down the mountainside. Before he knew it, his rifle went one way and he went the other, landing on a rock and breaking both his legs. That was the good news. The bad news was the ferocious bear charging towards him from a distance, and he couldn't move. "oh Lord" the man prayed. I'm so sorry for skipping mass today to come out here and hunt. Please forgive me and grant me just one wish.

Please make a Christian out of that bear that's coming at me. Please Lord!"

That very instant, the bear skidded to a halt, fell to its knees, clasped its paws together and began to pray aloud right at the man's feet.

"Dear God" the bear said, " Bless this food I am about to receive".

2nd hymn purple book no.167

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There is a place I call my own

Prayer.

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The first prayer is adapted from a prayer used in the Tamoha Unitarian Universalist church in Washington.

The second prayer is a meditative prayer by the Buddhist Thich Nhat Khan, followed by two minutes of silence and meditation music titled Rays of Love. Both prayers are prayers of peace

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Spirit of love and life, come and rest upon us, within us for these few moments of calm.

Quiet our striving and allow us a time for breath, for silence, a time to let go of all longings and desire. May we simply be here without worry or wish.

In the quiet of our hearts, pour in peace. Not only the absence of striving, not only the absence of conflict, but the fullness of peace that may be.

Peace - embodied in how we treat each other, into the world in compassion and care, shown in the world by acts of justice and mercy.

Into our hearts, pour the presence of peace, we pray.

The world cries out for the blessing of peace.

May we be those who draw together the threads of peace

Found in the beauty of the Earth that surrounds us,

Found in common and simple acts of kindness and compassion that fill the world

In the quiet of this prayer, let us weave peace to our weary, beloved world.

In the quiet of this prayer, may we open our hearts to the presence of peace.

So May it be.

As we are together praying for peace, let us truly be with each other.

Let us pay attention to our breathing.

Let us be relaxed in our bodies and our minds.

Let us return to ourselves and become wholly ourselves.

Let us be aware of the source of Being common to us all and to all that is.

Evoking the presence of the Great Companion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion- towards ourselves and toward all living beings.

Let us pray that all living beings realise that they are all nourished from the same Source of Life.

Let us pray that we ourselves cease to be the cause of needless suffering.

Let us pray that we may live in a way which will not needlessly deprive other beings of air, water, food, shelter, or the chance to live in health.

With reverence for Life and with awareness of the sufferings that are going on around us, let us pray for the establishment of peace in our hearts and on earth.

Reflective music Rays of love by Mahdl

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3rd hymn purple hymn book

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No. 96 Lord of our Growing years

Readings

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Viv will read a piece about Grace from the book Finding the Language of Grace.

Suzanne kindly lent me this book. Page 19. 2nd paragraph.

This will be followed by Caroline reading her own poem on Grace.

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Grace is not a thing, however; it's not another item in the world that I can acquire. It is a quality, not a substance. In everyday language this quality is expressed in several ways. When we say someone has "fallen from Grace" we mean they are no longer appreciated. So Grace is, first, the quality of being appreciated, the experience that affirms my goodness. Secondly, we add the indefinite article a, as in "a Grace", to

mean a specific experience of goodness. For example, a guest might say. It's been a real Grace to live with your family. Finally, Grace means the act of giving thanks, as seen in gratitude, a word derived from Grace. Gratitude responds to and multiplies Grace. Thomas Aquila's, whose writings are a touchstone of catholic theology, notes that these three aspects of Grace have a logical sequence:the underlying Grace of love is the necessary condition for giving somebody a particular Grace, and gratitude is the consequence of this gift. This sequence is found in the lives of those people who manifest the quality we call Grace.

Poem- incoming

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The wet road ahead  
Becomes a river of silver  
In a burst of low incoming winter Sun  
Exploding the day's dot to dot  
In a shower of stars  
A roadside bomb of peace  
" What's cooking" you ask  
" Receiving Grace" i reply  
My appointment with sadness  
Postponed for another day  
Service on "Do you know what Grace is" 25 jan2023

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I've never really understood what Grace means. I'm sure most of you understand it but some of you may ponder about it, just as I do.

Yes , I understand - there but for the Grace of God go I - but that's about it. Or do I understand it. I'm a great worrier and have been worrying and pondering about this over the last few weeks.

I saw this young man "running" with sticks strapped to his bare torso. One of his legs was spindly and his foot built up by about three inches. What a brave young man , I thought and to myself went to say " there but for the Grace of God go I" . I couldn't say it as it felt wrong. Why should he suffer more than I? I suppose I've always felt it was a selfish thing to say or think. This saying originates from a religious prisoner called John Bradford who was imprisoned in the Tower of London . He supposedly

said something like it when he saw a group of fellow prisoners being led out to execution, although he too was eventually executed.

My religious journey has taken me through Church of England, Catholicism, Islam, spiritualism and now here I am a tentative Unitarian spiritualist. I have friends of every religion and none but still I'm not sure what Grace is. Grace seems to mean in most religions when God gives help at difficult times.

I got even more puzzled when I got a book for Xmas and the quote to start the first chapter was :

He who learns must suffer. And even in sleep pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.

This was by someone called Aeschylus, Agamemnon 1.177. He was Greek and is described in Wikipedia as the father of Greek tragedy.

Very poetic and deep but I felt sure that Grace was not awful. This was an emotional response.

Reflecting on this now , after last week's story "maybe" I think I get it. It is when you are having a bad time , or you feel alone or sad and a little chink of light shows through, be it a sunrise, someone makes you a drink or says a few kind words. Or you're all waiting at the bus stop in the pouring rain and the driver lets you on well before they need to. Maybe it's even just a safe space where you are accepted and know you won't be judged. Perhaps it's even just believing in our innate goodness.

I've asked friends what they think Grace is - they either don't answer or say we always said it before school dinners , we were told to say Grace - For what we are about to receive May the Lord make us truly grateful , another take on this is Lord make us able to eat at the table. Maybe someone was just having fun with that one. Then we were allowed to eat. One friend thought it meant elegance of manner and charm. Other more religious friends just evaded answering. Another thought the miracle of life is a gift of Grace.

As usual, I looked up the meaning of Grace which originally comes from the Sanskrit word grnati which means he praises. It's original meaning in Middle English means something pleasing for which one feels grateful. So am i thinking too deeply about this.

In the book " Finding the Language of Grace" by Christopher Jamison , he says"

Grace is God's way of restoring trust in the goodness of life. The relationship between goodness and Grace can perhaps be understood by analogy with food. If food is nourishing, then it is considered to be full of goodness. Similarly, Grace is a goodness that nourishes the soul; it feeds the good in us so that we can trust each other and flourish together"

I experienced a wonderful example of this at the church cafe Wednesdays. About a year ago or even a bit longer , a man down on his luck came in and talked to me for some time. He needed some money, I can't remember why now but I only had £7 on me and I gave it to him. He said he would be back to pay it back. I thought no more about it , as to me I had given it to him. Well, this Wednesday he came into the cafe to pay me back my money. He insisted I take it. He said he'd been around a few times but was too embarrassed to come in after all this time. But this Wednesday, when peering through, he saw a man he knew quite well, so came in. He stayed for coffee and talked with some of us.

A wonderful example of the goodness of life and maybe an example of Grace. Not just from this man but unknowingly from the man in the cafe that he knew, which gave him the courage to come in.

The book above that I quoted from and we heard a reading earlier from it was lent to me by Suzanne and she has written inside the cover what the words of Grace stand for to her. These are" God's redemption at Christ's expense."

As Unitarians , we all have our own beliefs and journeys and respect each other's.

I thought about what humanists or Buddhists thought about Grace. Is Grace given freely, whether you deserve it or not. What about athletes like gymnasts or dancers? I go back to what one of my friends said about elegance. These people don't naturally have Grace , they work for years to achieve it, to achieve balance. Buddhism talks about being in balance. Great dancers and gymnasts develop a very strong core and then balance comes. So does Grace come from our spiritual centre , which we might call our soul and the show itself via our our bodily selves in the way we are towards others.

On Songs of Praise the other week, it was the anniversary of the hymn Amazing Grace. John Newton , who composed it , he did this in collaboration with the poet William Cowper. He is thought to have Grace given to him. I can't remember all the details but it didn't change him immediately, as he didn't write the hymn until 27 years

later and was still involved in the slave trade for six or seven years after. But maybe , like me, he pondered for some time about it.

Daniel Goldman, author of books Emotional intelligence and Social Intelligence states that the brain is social and we can actually catch each other's emotions like we catch a cold. He talks about a mirror neuron which help us reflect back the emotions we receive from others. He says we are wired for kindness and compassion. Maybe that's what Grace is.

I think that we shouldn't think or analyse the meaning of Grace too deeply. I just think , like I said the other week, we are imperfect beings but we all have innate goodness. In some it may get lost for a while. It may move us from greed, pain or even hate which we see to healing and love. I think it is a divine connection to each other and an acceptance of each other. Grace can give us resilience and strength through dark times just even by sitting in Oasis of Calm and being transported to a better place through a wonderful piece of music or just by a smile or raising money for a good cause. It can be a big or small. As in the hymn Amazing Grace, we have all at times been lost and other times been found by a kindness. Grace is a heartfelt emotion which allows us to give or receive a kindness. Yes, it is a gift, a wonderful gift.

Ann Lamont in her book Travelling Mercies writes

“ Grace is the light or electricity or juice or breeze that takes you from that isolated place and puts you with others”. I hope we try to do that in our Church here.

Christina and I always have a coffee before cafe opens , we were talking and saying we weren't very good people sometimes but we try to be good people.

I really like Todd Norman's definition of Grace as “:the power of the universe that reveals your true nature which is joy. Grace is responsible for everything that happens. It's what makes you breathe. It makes the universe function, planets spin and the sun rise and set. It's what makes things come into existence, stay awhile, and then dissolve into the cosmos. Grace creates and sustains the entire universe, including all of us.

Grace heals.”

Anne Lamott, a novelist and activist says “ I don't understand the mystery of Grace, it meets us where we are and doesn't leave us where it found us”. Maybe bit by bit it changes us somehow.

So I end with:

Try to see the goodness in yourself if not all day, every day but some of the time and look out for moments of Grace. Maybe Grace is just another word for love. And maybe another word for love is help. Thank you for listening.

Fourth hymn purple book

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No. 88 Let it be a dance we do

Benediction

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May green be the grass you walk on  
May blue be the skies above you  
May pure be the joys that surround you  
May true be the hearts that love you  
Anon

Closing music by Unspoken - Call it Grace