

States of Grace
Flower Communion Sunday
Palomar UU Fellowship ~ March 27, 2005
Rev. Beth A. Johnson

Ah, some of you dressed up for today...it's Easter Sunday! Easter season growing up was a time of great excitement *and* anxiety in my home. It was the custom in my home, as it was no doubt in many Catholic and Protestant families, to get a new Easter outfit.

I was early on a reluctant shopper – that, of course, has changed since I was four and five – but Mama told stories of how she had to negotiate with me in order to get me to agree to shopping for all the parts of the Easter outfit, from the shoes, to the dress, to the coat, to the hat – yes, my Easter hat! Mama especially enjoyed telling how one year, she'd negotiated the coat and dress but not the hat...my four year-old self wriggled against her knee as she tried to get hats on my head!

When all was said and done though, I loved Easter, not aware yet of its link to our pagan past – it was the hope and excitement of spring at the end of a long Chicago winter.

I loved having my new Easter outfit too. It would become the most special outfit in my wardrobe and I would wear it proudly to mass on Easter and then on special occasions all year long. As a young child I was a secret mystic entranced by the Mass and quite certain that God was in the midst of it all – the world and I seemed luminous at those times, although I didn't have those words - in short, my early religious experiences were classic Catholic experiences of sacramental grace.

There are several other Christian understandings of grace –
Many Protestants hold that grace is a matter of faith
We have Augustine to thank for the notion of grace linked to sin and redemption –
Eastern Christianity understands grace as saturating nature accessible at any and all times.

And at this Easter-time Christians understand the Easter story of resurrection as a symbol of God's grace in their lives. While grace can be known or debated as a concept, it is ultimately an experience.

And the notion and experience of grace is not the province of Christians alone, in fact, the experience is written about by Buddhists and Hindus, humanists and Pagans for it seems to be a universal experience – this sense of the sacred – the mystery, creativity, the apprehension of the whole of, a reality larger than ourselves.

Scholar, systems theorist, and Buddhist activist Joanna Macy writes of this sense of this grace in an extended self as having a power “to access wider resources – of courage, wisdom, endurance...there is an experience of being acted through,” as sustained by something greater than oneself,” that does not require a belief in God.”

Descriptions of states of grace reveal a sense of unity and oneness with the cosmos, or the activity...Can you think of times when you have had that experience – perhaps it was on the top of a mountain, or at the ocean, or making love, or when you were immersed in a task ...

Charlene Spretnak describes this unity beautifully, “When we experience consciousness of the unity in which we are embedded, the sacred whole that is in and around us, we exist in a state of grace. At such moments our consciousness perceives not only our individual self, but also our larger self, the self of the cosmos. The gestalt of unitive existence becomes palpable...we are created in the “image” of a participatory universe.”

There is a “more-ness” operative in grace – a sense that we are part of a greater whole...and at the same time there is an “enough-ness” an assurance that we, who we are in that moment is enough.

There is an ultimate mercy in life – a deeper grace.
Grace is a freshness deep down that fills us, opens us, empowers us...
Grace saves us;
Grace saves us from isolation;
Grace saves us from the myth of separateness while at the same time affirming our uniqueness;
Grace saves us from our own unforgiveness, from our blindness;
Grace then empowers us...

Here a member of the congregation sang these two verses acappella and without a mic..

“Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a soul like me,
I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.
Shall I be walking through the skies on flowering beds of ease
While other strive to gain the prize and sink in stormy seas.”

Bond shared with me that he sung this song, with this additional verse from another old hymn, in the context of the civil rights movement – this points us to two of the truths of grace:

First that it happens to us as individuals, there is a privacy to it, an inwardness, a transformation of the heart or disposition that changes us even if only for a moment – it relieves our wretchedness – for we all have our own.

And grace is an affirmation of the rightness of the moment, of our place in the cosmic scheme of things.

And the other truth of experiencing saving grace is that it is not just us who are saved – grace is, at times, a collective experience of voices lifted in song; of losing oneself in the work of justice; of watching our children fly kites and blow bubbles and hunt for eggs...

I think for it to be grace there must be an expansion of the self – Joanna Macy reminds us that in systems theory it is apprehension of “the pattern that connects,” in Buddhist thought it is the Jeweled Net of Indra, in secular terms it is deep ecology; however understood, grace is the informing, infusing of power to action - “one simply finds oneself empowered to act on behalf of other beings or on behalf of the larger whole – and the empowerment itself seems to come through that or those for whose sake one acts.”

The enough-ness that we find when we apprehend our place in things, the more-ness that inspires our awe and our reverence, moves us to sympathy for all in entire web.

States of grace grant us the gift of letting go of being in control – UU minister Fred Muir – “Grace is unexpected – you don’t know when it will occur, it is undeserved, there is nothing you can do to earn it, yet it is everywhere, all about you.”

Bond put this well when he said that grace allows you to “give up the struggle, that you can’t save yourself - you don’t need to be all powerful.”

Rumi writes –

“You are so weak, give up to grace,
The ocean takes care of each wave
Til it gets to shore
You need more help than you know.”

While there is nothing you can do to earn grace – it truly is a gift – you must be willing to receive it. It seems effortless and it is on some level, and yet there is a preparation of the heart

that can predispose us to the listening, the noticing, the apprehending of oneness – the more-ness and enough-ness that cradles and supports and opens us...

Grace reminds us of our inherent worth and dignity and draws us into a right-ness with the world.

We will celebrate that beauty and grace that is found in our living tradition – the flower communion that reminds us that each of us is unique and yet connected; responsible for our growth and yet dependent upon the wider whole; that we carry our community and the grace of association with us.

****The Flower Communion followed this homily.*