



Growing in Grace: Responding to God's Presence

Recently my pastor, Jim Hopkins, preached a series of sermons on grace based on Philip Yancey's book, "What's so Amazing About Grace?" Sitting in the sanctuary of Oakland's Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church, it reminded of the many times I heard David Bartlett and Rod Romney address the same theme from that pulpit. These pastors have helped me to understand the importance of grace for healthy living. My reminiscing and internal dialogue led me to an even clearer understanding of grace and its consequences.

To begin with, it seems to me that grace is inherent to God's very nature. If God is love then grace is the most natural outgrowth of that reality. Gerard Manley Hopkins proclaims that "Earth is charged with the grandeur of God." I love this image – creation itself is teeming and buzzing with love and grace, the very essence of God. How richly we are blessed, if we would just see and believe!

When we find ourselves in environments charged with fear and hate, with anxiety and apathy, with alienation and boredom, there is significant incongruity between what we experience and what God has intended. Instead of giving ourselves over to the infinite possibilities with which God graces us, we often find ourselves struggling to preserve some limited vision of what we believe life ought to be. "I must conform to this image or that behavior in order to be accepted. More truth, more light, greater understanding? No thanks. Give me the good old ways, songs, Book, etc. If I can just hold tightly enough to this 'anchor' of certainty, I may be able to stay afloat forever. At least I won't have to try swimming in this sea of uncertainty. Don't bother me to grow in grace. (Well, OK, maybe that last one's too far. I'll pay lip service to it, but please don't challenge me to mean it.)" This reminds me of Malvina

Reynolds's song, *Magic Penny*. "Love is something if you give it away, You'll end up having more.... It's just like a magic penny, Hold it tight and you won't have any...."

We often find ourselves confused and fearful in the face of God's abundance. It seems we already know too much and we can't figure out what to do with what we know. We feel overwhelmed by the choices we have and the decisions we must make. This presents a moral dilemma. What do we do with God's grand and good gifts? Do we take our "talents" and multiply them or do we bury them in fear? As beings made in God's image, do we take our own capacities for love and grace, for mercy and wonder, for trust and growth, and hide them under some notion that we must hang onto the little we've got, for surely there is not enough to go around. Is this not an example of "little faith?" "I'm not going to be moving any mountains here, let alone love my neighbor. It's all I can do to drag myself to work and come home to watch some TV before I turn in. The kids have worn me out and I still have six loads of laundry to do tonight. I've got to get out there and find Mr./Ms. Right (without whom I am nothing!)" (If none of these fit, you may add your own scenario.)

Miriam Therese Winter, in her "Joy Is Like the Rain" collection penned this little ditty: "I cannot come to the wedding. Don't bother me now. I've married a wife; I've bought me a cow. I've fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum, Please, hold me excused, I cannot come." How ungracious! And so the King sent his servants out to the highways and byways to bring in "whosoever" would come. Grace in action!

There is room! There is enough! If only WE believed it. How would our lives be different? Would there be time and energy for ethnic cleansing, gay bashing, put downs, ridicule, stigma, marginalization, hate? Would there be time and energy for children and youth who are questioning and scared and trying to find their way, room for wondering at the diversity of creation, energy for ending war and hunger and poverty, hearts for celebrating life with a resounding YES to it's hope and uncertainty, joy and pain, suffering and wholeness? Would churches be full (or empty!) because worship is a way of life and people's concerns and celebrations are shared and respected, heard and treasured everywhere?

The grace is there! It is always there! In

darkness and confusion, heartbreak and backache, fear and frustration, all we have to do is reach out to touch it. I hear your skepticism. Sounds like "Pollyanna." Well, maybe we could use more Pollyannas and fewer generals and politicians and bishops in our lives. However, I do know that pain and suffering and insecurity and fear and hate are real. I doubt they will disappear soon. In the meantime, though, here between the grandeur and goodness of Creation and the healing and wholeness of God's emerging Realm, could we commit ourselves - intentionally, willfully - to opening ourselves to grace, to God's gifts, to Christ's resurrection, to the Spirit's presence all around us? Could we make a life-affirming shift in attitude toward ourselves, others, creation itself? God is here, now, right in the middle of our living and our being. If we do not believe that, and, if we do not *act* as if we believe it (even when we doubt it,) then how can we claim to be followers of, let alone joint heirs, with the Christ?

For too long sexual minority folk have hung our heads in shame. We have been told, and have come to believe, that we are flawed or diseased or inadequate or damaged goods - *dis-graced* and *dis-graceful*. But this is such a lie! "It is God who has made us" and loves us and calls us. "We are God's people and the sheep of God's pasture." Perhaps it is time to lift our heads and look around – as truly difficult as that may be for those of us who have been so deeply wounded by our victimization and oppression. Yes, raise our lovely heads crafted in the likeness of God to look around, to unbury our talents, to grow beyond our fears in order to claim the richness of life that God has provided. There is enough love to go around. There is enough grace to embrace all of creation.

The only catch – so small and yet so large – is that we must begin the process by reaching out to touch it. It is there for the asking – always, eternal, abundant beyond our wildest imagining; yet it appears inert, lifeless, even nonexistent if we do not choose to activate it by saying yes to it. The very power of the God who created us is available to us if we will claim it – faith flourishing, hope soaring, love empowering, grace abounding. It's ours for the claiming.

God, free us from our fears, our insecurities, our "little faith," and grant to us the passion to grow in grace by responding in faith to the love in which we are eternally immersed. Amen.

