

Grace, Amazing Grace  
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A sermon on *grace* could be about a number of different things. One could probably devote a whole semester's worth of sermons to the various concepts that go by that name.

But did any of you suspect that I'd start a sermon on grace by talking about my grandmother?

My grandmother was named by her parents *Grace Davis*. When she married my grandfather she became *Grace Davis Hunter*. The name was an appropriate choice. After all, her father, the Rev. Herbert Erastus Davis, was a Presbyterian minister, and grace is a good theological topic.

But what, you may be wondering, is the connection between, on the one hand, my grandmother's name, Grace, and the theological concept that presumably was behind it, and, on the other hand, grace notes in music? [*musical example: B/C, D#/E, F#/G*] And how do those examples of grace relate to the grace that one may or may not say before meals?

I had never been bothered by these questions – indeed, I had never even thought of them – until I decided that every minister – even UU ministers – should preach on grace at least once, and what was I waiting for?

So let's take a look at grace notes and before-you-eat grace.

Why are grace notes called grace notes? [*musical example: D#/E, F#/G, B/C*] They are something extra, an embellishment, they are notes not really needed for the melody, but a free gift from the composer to the listener. A musicologist could say much more, I'm sure, but that will have to wait for coffee hour. And I'm not the musicologist.

Let's move on to the before-you-eat grace. Some of us say grace before meals. You could call it a blessing – both words are in common use. Saying grace before a meal is a way of saying thank-you for it. Grace and gratitude come from the same Latin word, *gratia*. Saying grace before meals is one way of practicing an attitude of gratitude. [see Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (HarperCollins, 2004)]

I like to remind myself that I'm thankful for the food, thankful for those who produced it, and transported it, and processed it, and cooked it, and served it; I'm thankful to nature for making it possible; thankful to be inside where it's warm and dry and not out in the cold and the rain. There's always a lot to be thankful for. Grace is a reminder of our interdependence – we

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couldn't survive on our own. And don't get too carried away – you don't want the food to get cold before you've had a chance to eat it.

And I think it's beneficial for a family to eat together, and to start their meal with a ritual of some sort, a ritual of gratitude and appreciation and togetherness.

When I was growing up the only occasions on which we said grace before a meal was when we were with my grandparents – my father's parents. Grace was always said, either by my father – when we were at our house – or by my grandfather – when we were at my grandparents' house. Apparently grace is men's work – everything else to make the meal a reality was done by the women.

When my father said grace, he always said the same thing. My recollection is that it was the grace he learned at Olivet College, though I don't remember how I got that idea. I was trying to remember the words he used, and feeling disappointed that I couldn't, and then, while I was standing under the shower, it came to me – “For these and all our blessings, the Lord make us truly thankful.” Short and to the point, easily memorized, and I've managed to remember it, though I have not heard my father – or anyone else – recite these words in more than forty years.

If I were to adopt this grace as my own, I'd probably leave the Lord out of it and drop the sense of obligation, and say something like “For these and all our blessings, may we be truly thankful.”

Now my grandfather had a formula that he always use, but I seem to have lost it entirely. I asked my brother if he remembered our grandfather's grace from more than a half century ago, and he responded, without great confidence, with “Bless this food to our use and us to Thy service.”

We never discussed this back then, but I wonder whether my father wanted his parents to assume that we always said grace before meals, whether they were with us or not. Now, I've always assumed that my grandparents *always* said grace before their meals, whether we were with them or not. But possibly they did it just for *our* benefit.

Sometimes, on our weekend visits to my grandparents, after church, we would go to the college (that's Michigan State University now) for Sunday dinner at the Union rather than eating at home. I'm not absolutely sure of this, but I don't think that our food was ever blessed when we ate out. I'm now brave enough – with some encouragement from Kerry – to say grace in a public restaurant, and even to hold hands while doing it.

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Some of you came to a sermon on grace expecting to hear some heavy duty Christian theology. Some of you maybe even were hoping for the theology. Others of you were hoping –

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perhaps even praying – that I could get through the whole sermon without getting into theology at all.

In Christian theology, grace is defined as a free gift from God. It's not something we earn; it's not something we necessarily deserve; it's not something that we have to pay for; it's not something that justice requires. If God didn't give it to us we would have no grounds for complaint. It's up to God's discretion. If you have to do something to get it, if grace has conditions attached, it's no longer *grace*. [see Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (2004), p. 11]

This issue comes up in the most serious way when the issue is salvation – will God save us from eternal damnation, will God save us from the hell that we, we sinners, deserve? I'm simplifying some here, but there are two basic answers. One answer is, if we do the right thing, if our lives are worthy enough, then God will recognize our moral desert, our good works, and will save us.

The second answer – this comes from Martin Luther, by the way – is that there is no way that we can satisfy God; we will always fall short. Our only hope is that God will save us, that God, through God's grace, will save us from what would otherwise be our fate, eternal hellfire.

The first answer, salvation based on our conduct, is, roughly speaking, the Unitarian answer. Unitarians were and are believers in good works. And Unitarians never worried too much about the fate of their immortal souls, generally assuming that *they* were surely good enough, even if others weren't.

The second answer, based on the grace of God, is roughly speaking, the Universalist answer, except the Universalists believed that God – a perfectly good and loving God – would extend this grace to all of humanity. Everyone will be saved.

This raises the question, why were not all of those who believed in salvation by grace universalists? Why did they assume that God's love might not extend to the whole human race?

Here's the catch. God's grace – God's saving grace – is indeed available for everyone, but you have to accept it. You accept God's grace through your faith, your trust, in Jesus Christ.

This, you may think, is getting the works requirement back in, but through the back door. How do we know when our faith is adequate? Shirley Guthrie, the author of the textbook we used in my course in systematic theology, back at Wesley Theological Seminary, a decade ago, told us that viewing faith as just another requirement, as a hoop to pass through on the way to heaven, "is a serious distortion." [*Christian Doctrine* (rev. ed. 1994), p. 322] But here's his conclusion, several pages later: "If we want to receive the gift of the assurance of God's love, forgiveness, and acceptance, we must be willing to enter into the life of faith, to do what faith requires." [p. 327] That still looks like a works requirement to me.

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I prefer the approach of Universalism – everyone is ultimately reconciled to God; all are saved.

Now, I don't know if there's anyone in this room who is worried about the prospect of spending eternity in hell – and I'm not going to ask for a show of hands. But it is my guess that most of us know someone who has this worry. Feel free to share the good news of Universalism with them – there is no hell – that's the simplest way of putting it: there is no hell.

One more thought on hell before I go on to more pleasant topics. It seems to me that I would be unable to enjoy heaven if I knew that others had been sent to the other place. I would have to spend my time organizing until together we convinced God to shut down hell and to liberate those who had been imprisoned there.

Or let me put this another way, how can I enjoy the good and plentiful food that I eat every day, when I know that the millions of Americans who rely on food stamps just had their meager benefits cut? How can I enjoy the health care that is provided for me – through Medicare and the federal employee health insurance system – when I know that some states have refused to expand their Medicaid programs to include more people unable to afford to buy health insurance?

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If we look at grace in a more general way, we can decide that grace doesn't require God. Let's set God and Christian theology aside and see what we can make of grace. Here's a story that was in the New York Times, from the Metropolitan Diary column that appears on Mondays.

Dear Diary:

At the beginning of this season, I found a matching hat and scarf in a tangle of turquoise and browns that perfectly complemented my winter jacket. Unfortunately, I lost the hat.

Then, in mid-January, as I was leaving the Kandinsky exhibition at the Guggenheim, I spotted a lovely young woman – obviously with excellent taste – wearing the same hat. “Hey,” I shouted, waving my scarf. We chatted for a few minutes and I mentioned that I'd tried to buy a replacement hat but the store had sold out.

“Here,” she answered, pulling off her hat and pushing it into my hands.

“No, no,” I protested.

“Take it,” she repeated. “It would make me happy.” When I tried to pay her for it, she insisted. “It's a gift!”

It got me to wondering what it would be like if all New Yorkers began to give gifts to each other, or to tourists, as a practice. I know I am tucking a new umbrella in my shopping bag to give to a soaking-wet stranger the next time it rains. [New York Times, 2/8/10, p. A16]

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An example of grace. Here's another one. The trees where we live have been beautiful this fall, likewise the trees that we've seen on our travels. An amazing sight, a beautiful scene – I had done nothing to deserve it. It's grace, amazing grace.

Before I offer any more examples, I want to give you a chance to think of your own. In the next minute or so – and I'll keep quiet, to give you a chance to think – try to come up with three examples of grace that you have received. And don't be alarmed. I won't ask you to share with your neighbor. I haven't given you three by five cards on which to write down your discoveries and then pass them to the center aisle. This is strictly for you.

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Here are some of the examples that I've come up with. I've cheated, of course, I expect I've been thinking about all this longer than you have.

I'm thankful to be alive. How we come to be alive is something that none of us can explain. We understand the biology of it, of course – some of us much better than others. But why is that person who resulted *me* and not someone else? Why am I alive *now* rather than, say, three thousand years ago? How do I happen to be a human being rather than a coyote or a cabbage? These are meaningless, perhaps quite silly, questions, but, really, isn't it a miracle that we're alive? Think of all the people that might have existed but don't.

Here's another example. I'm thankful for the family I was born into. I'm inclined to say that I chose my parents well – but I know it doesn't work that way. In any event, I am fortunate to have had a supportive family, a family that believed in education, a family that gave me a good start in life. I realize, let me hasten to add, I realize that not everyone is as fortunate as I am in this respect. I know I am fortunate; I know I did and could do nothing to deserve this good fortune. I know that there are those – probably here in this room – whose families have not been a blessing to them, but more of a curse.

The poem that we read together earlier as our responsive reading, the Sun, by Mary Oliver, reminds me of a third example. [*New and Selected Poems* (1992), pp. 50-51] Of course we should be appreciative of our sun – life would be impossible without it.

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Can we reject grace? Or can we fail to accept the grace that is offered to us? Shirley Guthrie, the author of the theology text book I referred to earlier, appears to argue that we can miss out on the grace that God makes available for us. God loves us and wants to save us, but if we don't accept the invitation by having faith, or trust, in Jesus, then we can be lost. Gulley and Mulholland, in the reading I shared earlier, argue for a different position. For them, the grace of God is irresistible. [Philip Gulley & James Mulholland, *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (2003)]

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The second reading this morning was from Fred Muir, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Maryland and a friend of Kerry's and mine. While I'm sure that there's no room for hell in Muir's cosmology, Muir appears to side more with Guthrie than with Gulley and Mulholland on the irresistibility of grace. Recall what he says:

But there is only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. If you're not open to it, if you're not willing to receive it, then there won't be grace. [Fredric John Muir, *Heretics' Faith: Vocabulary for Religious Liberals* (2001), pp. 103 (abridged)]

The woman in New York could have turned down the hat. More generally, we can fail to take advantage of the opportunities that life gives to us. We can always look for the negative rather than appreciating the positive; we can complain rather than acting; we can be selfish rather than generous; we can isolate ourselves rather than living in a cooperative, give-and-take community. We can block out of our awareness the beauty that surrounds us. There are many ways in which we can miss out on life. But why would we want to?

A few minutes ago I gave as an example of grace the beautiful leaves with which we have been blessed this fall. But what if I had gone outside to bring in the newspaper and slipped on the slippery leaves and fell? What if I had taken the car out and was momentarily blinded by the falling leaves ended up in the ditch? What if I had a large yard, with lots of tall leaf-filled trees. How would I feel about raking them all up? Or how do I feel about noisy leaf blowers? Nothing bad has happened to me, leafwise, but when I see fall leaves as beautiful, I know there are others who see them as a bother, at best. More generally, what might appear to be grace to me could be a horror for someone else.

I mentioned earlier – in a joking sort of way – that I had chosen my parents well. Of course, we can't choose our parents, but we sometimes take credit for achievements that were really gifts we received. It was, some of you will recall, Barry Goldwater who had the entrepreneurial sense to inherit a department store. Can we tell the difference between something we receive by grace and something we earn? Most things probably have a little of each. I recommend humility.

Return to the woman in New York who was given the hat – the hat that replaced the one she had lost. For her, it was an example of grace. For the woman who gave it to her, it was an instance of generosity. She made a free gift; she was under no obligation. And in the giving she made the world a better place, not much better, perhaps, but definitely better. Recall how the writer ended her story:

It got me wondering what it would be like if all New Yorkers began to give gifts to each other, or to tourists, as a practice. I know I am tucking a new umbrella in my shopping bag to give to a soaking-wet stranger the next time it rains.

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That's the kind of world that I want to live in. That's what Jesus might call the kingdom of God, if he were among us today.

We can't transform the United States in the next few months. But let's start with this congregation – it's a more manageable size. Think of ways that you can be generous to others. Think of acts of grace that are within your reach. The choir can always use another voice – that voice could be yours. You can bring flowers. You can take a casserole to a shut-in. You can take your turn downstairs learning from the children. You can clean the toilets. You can make a contribution to the UU Service Committee for relief for typhoon victims in the Philippines.

May our lives be filled with grace; may we recognize and accept the grace that is available to us; and may we be agents of grace. Amen.