

## What's So Amazing About Grace?

By Rev. Lorraine Jones (*Adapted from sermon by Rev. Marlin Lavinhar*)

*One of the most wonderful and potentially problematic ideas in religion is grace. It implies that no matter what a person has done, that person can still enjoy the gift of grace. Most people prefer a world in which people who do wrong face the negative consequences of their actions. Grace, it would seem, flies in the face of justice. It begs the question, "What's So Amazing About Grace?"*

Bakers Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology defines the word "grace", "Grace" in biblical parlance can, like forgiveness, repentance, regeneration, and salvation, mean something as broad as describing the whole of God's activity toward man or as narrow as describing one segment of that activity. An accurate, common definition describes grace as the unmerited favor of God towards humanity.

What if everyone we favor and everyone we fear and everyone we help and everyone we exploit and everyone we love and everyone we hate were the reflected image of God, unique and valuable? What if we really believe that all people are created equal? This was a question asked by the columnist Michael Gerson in a column he wrote recently in the Washington Post. He went on to write that the Christian vision of universal rights and dignity has grabbed men and women by the collar in every generation. The William Wilberforces, the Dorothy Days, the Martin Luther King Juniors who have articulated the Christian ideals in ways that have moved the world towards historic change for equality. We need people like these, right now, in this country who can speak articulately and authoritatively about Christian theology and morality, otherwise our nation will continue to be dominated by a Christianity that oppresses rather than liberates.

Today I want us to look at that radically egalitarian idea of grace which is embedded in the heart of Christianity. The four Gospels about Jesus (*or Yeshua as I prefer to call him*) contain different and sometimes contradictory things but they all emphasize the central truth that Yeshua longed to plant in every heart which is that the core purpose of life is love, love of neighbor, love of self, love of God and, yes, even love of our enemies.

During his life Yeshua poured the love that he had into as many people as he could and those people in turn shared that love with the world as best they could so that 21 centuries and many, many generations later, here we are, still learning to give and receive from that bottomless well of love.

From what spring does this endless love flow? It begins with the awareness that we are all one, one with God if you believe in God, one with the universe... I hope you believe in the universe, one with each other and one with all life and creation. When a person is really awake to this awareness, it causes us to respond to the bounty of creation with love. Grace is the idea that this boundless love is available to everyone no matter who we are, no matter where we are, no matter what we've done or have failed to do.

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In her book "Amazing Grace" author Kathleen Norris tells a story of a time when she was at the airport and saw a young couple with an infant child at the departure gate. The baby was staring intently at other people as they came in and as soon as he recognized a human face, no matter who it was, no matter if they were young or old, pretty, ugly, bored, or happy, or worried looking, he would respond with absolute delight. "It was beautiful to watch," she said, "Our drab departure gate had become the gate of heaven." And as she watched the baby, play with any adult who would allow it, she thought to herself, "This must be how God looks at us, staring into our faces in order to be delighted at creation."

This story is a great metaphor for grace, the idea that there are blessings in this world like sunshine and rain that do not play favorites. Mathew 5:45 in the New Testament tells us that God "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth **rain** on the **just** and on the **unjust**." Grace involves gifts that we receive regardless of who we are and what we've done.

I used to have a Border Collie mix named Cooper and Cooper loved everyone and everyone loved Cooper. So much so, that some woman decided she loved him more than we did and stole him away in front of our next-door neighbor, dragging him into her car and speeding away. Everyone who came to our house, Cooper would just love and lick them up. Guard Dog was not his calling. If a robber had come into our house this dog would have just licked on them and rolled over on his back for a belly rub. This is grace.

Grace is this idea of a blessing that does not discriminate. It doesn't matter whether you're an axe murderer or Mother Teresa. UU minister Dr. John Wolfe used to say grace refers to the goodness of life which is available to all of us to the degree that we have the capacity to receive it... "The goodness of life that's available to all of us to the degree that we have the capacity to receive it." He explained that through the course of a person's life obstacles come up that become barriers to our ability to receive all the goodness of life that's available to us.

Our ability to give and to receive love and to see the connection that we have with others and all of life becomes blocked by things like jealousy and anger and selfishness by being betrayed or abused. There are all kinds of things that happen. They cut us off. But the tragic thing is that a lot of people are afraid to let go of all this because it has become their identity. The ego is holding on tight lest it and the body that holds it disappear.

There was an article from a paper a few years ago about a seven-year-old boy named Giovanni who had to leave an airplane because of an allergic reaction. He began to get very itchy and he was scratching all over. He started to get hives, so his mother informed the flight attendant who let them know that that there were dogs on the flight and on almost every flight. An airline spokesperson said that the allergic reaction was caused by a service animal that was on board the flight.

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The allergic reaction delayed the takeoff and after the flight attendants consulted with the airline's on-call doctor, the family, Giovanni, his mother, and his father were asked to leave the plane. Giovanni's mother said, "we understood, we got it and they helped us off the plane very nicely. But as we gathered our stuff, the people toward the back of the airplane clapped. Giovanni's feelings were crushed by the clapping."

A 7-year old boy. He could have been the infant in the earlier story loving on everybody and now the people were applauding as he was leaving. He said, "People who don't have sadness, they don't understand." What the passengers on the flight didn't know was that this trip was a bucket list trip for this family. It was a chance for them to visit family for a very important reason.

Giovanni's dad was sick with stage 4 throat cancer. Giovanni explained that his cancer was terminal and, with time running out, the trip was supposed to be a special one to make memories. Giovanni said, "I'm sad that this has to be the memory with my dad." His father said that he couldn't believe people were responding to the incident in this way. "As a dad, I was just hopeless right then. I just looked at the people clapping, and I was just shaking my head. I was like man let's get out of here."

As the family waited for the next flight, they tried to turn something terrible into a teaching moment. You don't know how much time people have. You don't know why someone's hurting so just be nice, just be kind. The father said there are so many things that cause people to feel disconnected, to feel alienated from other people, to fail to see our oneness with each other and the people around us.

In that sense many people today are lost (not in the fundamentalist meaning but in the humane meaning). Religion at its best, or Church at its best, is here to help us find our way to wake up, to realize the oneness that we have with all life and to learn to give and to learn to receive love.

I'd be curious to know if you came into the church this morning feeling alienated or confused or sad or uncertain or hurting or what you were feeling and if through the course of the morning somehow that's shifted for you. Maybe during discussion some of you will share that with us. But keep in mind that the starting place for grace doesn't have to be the Bible, doesn't even have to be a belief in God or a Creator but it's remembering that we're all one.

It's not just a Christian thing. Buddhists teach it, Hindus teach it. It's a core understanding of many faiths. But when we understand that we're one then we'll seek to love others as ourselves knowing that what happens to one happens to all and to ignore another's suffering is to ignore our own. "Truly I say to you, inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me." Matthew 25:40

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Imagine a world in which everyone wakes up to this awareness of our oneness and we suddenly stop excluding people because of their gender identification or the nation they were born in, or their political affiliation or their degree of Education or their sexual orientation, or a perceived disability, or their net worth or some other reason we use to separate us. You are part of making such a world a reality.

Can you see how what we do and what we stand for here is part of pouring out that kind of love into the world. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done. That's the lesson of grace. As long as we still have life in us, we have the ability to be a vessel of that kind of love and pour it out in this world.

Jacob, in the Bible, was a liar and a cheater and a thief, but he became the head of a great nation. We're told Moses murdered someone, yet he helped his people come out of bondage and get to the promised land. King David was an adulterer and had one of his own soldiers basically murdered by putting him on the front lines to face certain death in order to have that man's wife and yet he's considered the greatest king in the Bible. Peter denied Jesus (Yeshua), and Paul persecuted the early Christians before he became one, yet they became the foundations of the Christian church.

Not to excuse their actions in any way, but if the Bible says anything, I believe its writers were trying to tell us that the Creator uses flawed and imperfect people like you and me to improve the world. You and I are amazingly broken at times and beloved at the same time. Our job is to use our imperfect lives and our short time upon this earth to be a wellspring of that amazing and bottomless grace and love of which we are a part. All the rest is commentary. I love you all.

Amen, Blessed Be and So it is.

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### Michael Gerson, Washington DC

Columnist Michael Gerson is a nationally syndicated columnist who appears twice weekly in The Post. He is the author of "Heroic Conservatism" (HarperOne, 2007) and co-author of "City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era" (Moody, 2010). He appears regularly on the "PBS NewsHour," "Face the Nation"

and other programs. Gerson serves as senior adviser at One, a bipartisan organization dedicated to the fight against extreme poverty and preventable diseases. Until 2006, Gerson was a top aide to President George W. Bush as assistant to the president for policy and strategic planning. Prior to that appointment, he served in the White House as deputy assistant to the president and director of presidential speechwriting and assistant to the president for speechwriting and policy adviser.

Books by Michael Gerson:

"City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era"

"Heroic Conservatism: Why Republicans Need to Embrace America's Ideals" (And Why They Deserve to Fail If They Don't)

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**William Wilberforce** (24 August 1759 – 29 July 1833<sup>[1]</sup>) was a British politician, [philanthropist](#), and a leader of the movement to stop the [slave trade](#). A native of [Kingston upon Hull](#), Yorkshire, he began his political career in 1780, eventually becoming a [Member of Parliament](#) for [Yorkshire](#) (1784–1812). He was independent of party. In 1785, he became an evangelical Christian, which resulted in major changes to his lifestyle and a lifelong concern for social reform and progress. He was educated at [St. John's College, Cambridge](#).

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**Dorothy Day** [ObiSB](#) (November 8, 1897 – November 29, 1980) was an American journalist, [social activist](#), and [Catholic](#) convert. Day initially lived a [bohemian](#) lifestyle before gaining public attention as a social activist after her [conversion](#). She later became a key figure in the [Catholic Worker Movement](#)<sup>[1]</sup> and earned a national reputation as a [political radical](#),<sup>[2]</sup> perhaps the best known radical in [American Catholic Church](#) history.<sup>[3]</sup>

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**Kathleen Norris** (Benedictine Oblate) is the award-winning poet, writer, and author of the New York Times bestsellers *The Cloister Walk*, *Amazing Grace*, and *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, and *Acedia & Me*. A Benedictine oblate of Assumption Abbey for the past 30 years, Norris divides her time between Hawaii and South Dakota. In the book "Amazing Grace" -Struggling with her return to the Christian church after many years away, Kathleen Norris found it was the language of Christianity that most distanced her from faith. Words like "judgment," "faith,"

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"dogma," "salvation," "sinner"—even "Christ"—formed what she called her "scary vocabulary," words that had become so codified or abstract that their meanings were all but impenetrable. She found she had to wrestle with them and make them her own before they could confer their blessings and their grace. Blending history, theology, storytelling, etymology, and memoir, Norris uses these words as a starting point for reflection and offers a moving account of her own gradual conversion. She evokes a rich spirituality rooted firmly in the chaos of everyday life—and offers believers and doubters alike an illuminating perspective on how we can embrace ancient traditions and find faith in the contemporary world.

**Rev. Dr. John Burton Wolf** - Unitarian Universalist minister, (Sept. 6, 1925 - September 19, 2017) Tulsa, OK.

Dr. Wolf, author of the book, *The Gift of Doubt*, was the senior minister of All Souls Church in Tulsa for 35 years, before becoming the Minister Emeritus in 1995. Through his leadership, All Souls grew to become one of the largest Unitarian Universalist churches in the country and helped to establish two other Unitarian Universalist churches in Tulsa. Hope Unitarian Church was founded in 1969 and Church of the Restoration was formed intentionally as a multiracial congregation in the Greenwood District in 1988.

During Dr. Wolf's tenure at All Souls, he preached about civil rights, reforming the funeral home industry, the importance of public education, and the arts.