

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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Amazed by Grace

My friends Peter and Ruth Fleck fled the Nazi invasion of their native Holland. On the day they left, as Ruth finished packing two small suitcases, she tucked in a small treasure: an early Chinese statue of a kneeling horse. A neighbor stopped by to say goodbye, and brought a rare gift in those days of wartime austerity: a large sausage. With a heavy heart, Ruth removed the kneeling horse and replaced it with the meat.

As the Flecks made their way on a long and harrowing journey to the United States, their neighbor's generosity and Ruth's prudence may have saved the Flecks' lives. Despite all the tragedy and all the loss, Peter would say, "Grace, pure grace."

This morning, I invite you to join me in reflecting on ways that we might *engage the presence of grace* – the ways in which we can be on the lookout for grace in our lives; and the ways in which we ourselves can be agents of grace.

The concept of grace comes to us from Christianity, most often accompanied by the words "free and unmerited:" grace is amazing! The myth is that John Newton, an eighteenth-century slave ship captain, was struck with a change of heart, reversed course, and wrote the hymn: "Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

As truth would have it, John Newton retired after making a small fortune from human trafficking and became a well-respected priest with a talent for preaching and writing hymns. Over the course of many years, his views shifted; eventually, he *evolved* from slaver to abolitionist. There was nothing sudden about his conversion: no lives were saved, and what he did

about his conscience is not recorded. Still, we can celebrate that “amazing grace” – slow but sure – came at last.

Years ago, Bill Moyers made a PBS documentary about the hymn. There’s a scene from a rock concert at Wembley Stadium in London; different bands have whipped the huge crowd¹ into very high spirits. And then comes the closing act ... opera singer Jessye Norman. What were the producers thinking? Standing all alone on stage – no instruments – before an audience wild for more rock music, Jessye begins to sing *Amazing Grace*. Slowly, very slowly ... “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” By the second verse, the crowd has fallen completely silent. *Amazing grace.*

My colleague Robbie Walsh writes, “I heard the Second Brandenburg Concerto, ... and I was swept away. I remembered a story about the people who send messages into outer space. Someone suggested sending a piece by Bach. The reply was, ‘But that would be bragging.’

“Some say we get what we deserve in life,” he continues, “but I don’t believe it. We certainly don’t deserve Bach. What have I done to deserve the Second Brandenburg Concerto? I have not been kind enough;” Robbie says, “I have not done enough justice; I have not loved my neighbor, or myself, sufficiently; I have not praised G*d enough to have earned a gift like this. Life is a gift we have not earned and for which we cannot pay.... The best we can do is express our gratitude for the undeserved gifts, and do our share of the work of creation.”²

I was out for a run this past week and started up a long, steep hill at the same time I started trying to solve a long, steep problem. Maybe ten minutes in, breathing hard and not seeing any solutions, I passed two guys who were ambling downhill. One of them looked up, smiled, and said, “Keep going.” It was exactly what I needed to carry me to the top, and to get the perspective I needed. My colleague Victoria Safford writes, “Grace sometimes ... comes from a stranger when, unexpectedly, we stumble into

¹ Crowd estimates ran to 70,000 people. Thanks to Queen Cheryl Thieret for reviving my memory of this scene with a beautiful recounting in the final pages of Philip Yancey’s *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, pp. 255-256

² Rev. Robert R. Walsh (Minister Emeritus, First Parish Church in Duxbury, MA), from *Stone Blessings: Meditations*

another's holiness, and remember, with such gratitude, we are all in this together. Sometimes you yourself are the stranger, full of grace unwittingly. You, yourself, are an instrument of grace.³ Keep going. Give thanks!

There's grace in gratefulness. In 1995, Christopher Reeve, Superman and Unitarian Universalist, was thrown from his horse, paralyzed from the neck down, and, immediately following the accident, experienced a period of utter despair. It didn't last. Giving an interview, seated in a wheelchair and breathing with the aid of a ventilator, he considered himself, he said, "a lucky guy." "I realized that the only way to go through life is to look at your assets," he continued, "and to see what you can still do. In my case, fortunately, I did not have any brain injury, so I still have a mind I can use." Now, eleven years after his death, his words call us to look for grace, even in the darkest places.

In very strong language, Christian theologian Paul Tillich writes, "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life [that] we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment, a wave of light breaks into our darkness.... If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience, we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience.... Nothing but acceptance."⁴

³ Closing words, Rev. Victoria Safford, *Stumbling Along with Grace*, preached at White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church (MN), 5/31/15. Please see whitebearunitarian.org/sermons/page/4/

⁴ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*. Please see media.sabda.org/alkitab-2/Religion-Online.org%20Books/Tillich,%20Paul%20-%20The%20Shaking%20of%20the%20Foundations.pdf

One of my touchstone experiences of grace happened many years ago, when I was serving our congregation in Provincetown. It started with a man named Hayes. Everyone knew his name, but I don't believe he had a friend in the world. His life was cigarettes and hard liquor and painting. He was a gifted landscape painter.

One afternoon, as I left the meeting house, I saw that Hayes had set up his easel just inside our fence. Usually, he was perched in the sand dunes above the open ocean or wedged against a sidewalk hedge in the East End. I wondered what had brought him into town.

As I came closer, he spoke first.

"Hope this is okay."

"Whatever we can do for the arts, Hayes," I answered.

"Have a look," he said.

Now we were having a conversation.

I looked. Emerging on his canvass was the front of the church – the lawn, the side garden, and the first floor, with the great door open.

"Hayes," – I went for broke – "would you like to come in?"

"Sure," he said, as if we'd been planning to meet. He put down his brush and wiped his hands on a turpentine rag, dissipating the smell of smoke and booze that hung in the air around him.

We walked upstairs to the sanctuary. The grey walls, painted in *trompe l'oeil* – "trick the eye" – shone in the late afternoon sunlight that slanted through the high windows. He glanced around and looked at me, expectantly. It occurred to me Hayes had seen it before.

"How do you like it?" he asked.

"I love it," I said. "It's magical. My favorite part is the nave behind the pulpit; I never really believe the wall is flat until I'm up there, eye to eye with it."

"We had fun doing it," he said. "Art students came from all over Europe to help us out." I knew that, some twenty years earlier, while the roof was being repaired, a hurricane had blown in and lifted the tarp. Water had rained into the sanctuary, ruining the paint. "The walls were covered with slimy green mildew," Hayes explained. "Before we could even start to paint, we had to erase the walls. Can you imagine? We all had Pink Pearl erasers, and stood on ladders – there must have been fifty of us. By the end, we were knee-deep in Pink Pearl eraser dust."

"Some chamber music orchestra was rehearsing here that summer," he continued. "The mornings were quiet, but just after noon, they'd come in and set up and start playing. It was amazing."

He fell silent. I wondered, "And then what happened?" Hayes turned from looking at the walls to face me. "I thought I might come around sometime," he said.

"That would be great," I said, amazed that church was even on his radar. "The service is at 11. You're always welcome."

It never occurred to me that he would actually come, but that Sunday, there he was, in a clean shirt, with his dark hair combed off his thin, ruddy face. He listened to my sermon attentively. During the sharing of joys and sorrows, he raised his hand.

If anyone else thought it odd that Hayes had made his way to church, no one let on.

He cut to the chase. "I just found out I have AIDS," he said. My mind flashed white for a moment, as I absorbed the blow of yet more illness, another loss to come. "It's made me think about my life, and how I want to change." He paused. I thought he might be done. But he continued, "I'm coming to church now, and I'm going to quit drinking." That was all; he sat down, and everyone clapped for him.

After the service, I spotted him lingering after coffee hour. Three members of my A.A. posse were talking with him. No one doubted that it would be a miracle if he could – or would – get sober.

The next Sunday, he was in church again. Again, he stood during the sharing of joys and sorrows. “I’m sober one week,” he said, and sat down. Again, everyone clapped.

And so it went, with Hayes reporting his sobriety to the congregation: “I have 21 days.... I have 35 days....” At 42 days, he shared that he had set his sights on attending 90 A.A. meetings in 90 days.

At 56 days, he was sick but still sober; he raised his hand and spoke from his seat. Two weeks later, he lay quietly on a pallet in front of the pulpit, but his face lit up as we celebrated 70 sober days with him.

By the next week, Hayes lay bedridden at home, but we all kept the calendar for him. He was wasting now – AIDS was ravaging his body. Still, he was eloquent about his spiritual awakening, and longtimers and newcomers to A.A. alike sat by his bedside, lovingly attending this dying, luminous man.

On the ninetieth day, an A.A. meeting was gathered at Hayes’ house, augmented by guests from the congregation. People sat on his bed, on the radiator and windowsills, and spilled out into the hall. The topic of the meeting was “The Promises” of Alcoholics Anonymous, which Hayes had memorized for this very special occasion. Slowly but surely, to the expectant crowd, he began, “If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are halfway through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.”⁵

It was the final meeting for which Hayes was conscious. One week later, people crowded into the sanctuary for his memorial service.

That fall, the congregation gave me a gift for my thirtieth birthday – Hayes’ painting of the meeting house, the one he had begun at the beginning

⁵ *Alcoholics Anonymous* [the Big Book], pp. 82-83

of the end, the one with the great door open.

Beloved spiritual companions,
Let us be on the lookout for grace,
and the ways in which we ourselves can be agents of grace.
So may we engage the presence of grace in our lives.
Sometimes it comes from a stranger;
sometimes we are the stranger, full of grace.
Keep going.

To send Bach into space would be bragging,
but let us give thanks;
there's grace in gratefulness,
and acceptance.
May we keep the great door open.

Amen.