

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**September 12, 2010**  
**1 Timothy 1:12-17**

**“...the grace of our Lord overflowed...”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

It was maybe ten years ago that I decided I needed a one-day get-away at a spa and so I headed up to the Berkshires to the Kripalu Center for Health in Lenox for a day of renewal and refreshment. After I paid my registration fee, I was directed to a large bulletin board that showed all the workshops and events held at the center that day. One special offering caught my eye, it was called “Dance as Prayer, Prayer as Dance.”

I can’t dance, I thought to myself, but I certainly like prayer. I wondered if I should participate. Then I thought: I’ll try it.

Once I entered the big studio space that held this prayer as dance workshop I found lots of people in leotards and yoga outfits and I immediately felt out of place in my sweatpants. People were stretching and striking poses; I sat on the floor thinking, what am I doing here?

Then the lovely, long-limbed woman leading the workshop drew us all into a big circle and told us we were going to start by writing prayers—they could be prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of praise, prayers of lament, whatever prayer we wanted to write. She passed out paper and pens and we sprawled on the floor and dutifully wrote prayers. Then she said we were to get into pairs and read our prayer to our partner. Then she said she was going to put on music so we could all “dance” our prayers.

Okay. So we got in pairs and read our prayers to our partners. Then, as she was about to put on music so we could “dance” our prayers, a man in the group raised his hand. “I am unsure how to dance my prayer,” he said to the long-limbed leader. “What do you mean by ‘dancing’ our prayers?”

The leader said that we should let ourselves go, feel the movement rising from the words on the page, and be guided by the presence of God's grace.

The man looked more perplexed. "Define God's grace," he said to her.

Without missing a beat, the leader said, "**Divine unmerited blessing.**"

I was stunned. Stunned by this moment of clarity on the part of the dance instructor. I knew that for years theologians, mystics and scholars had struggled to define grace and here this woman had a wonderful, simple, illuminating definition and it just rolled off her tongue.

I remember thinking to myself: Gee, years earlier, I had asked essentially the same question—could you define grace?—at my fancy divinity school to one of my fancy professors and he had hemmed and hawed and cleared his throat and not been helpful.

But this dance instructor did not hesitate at all and her definition was clear and beautiful.

Wow, I thought as I sat awkwardly on the floor of the big dance studio, she is right. God's grace is divine unmerited blessing.

Then I thought: forget the dumb prayer I just wrote.

I'll dance with the wonderful realization that GRACE is divine unmerited blessing.

The leader put on the music and I danced my little heart out.

Today, as we reflect on the Scripture reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, let's hold in our minds the simple definition of grace I heard years ago in a surprising setting.

Those three words—divine, unmerited, blessing—are all demonstrated in the passage for today.

Our text is from Paul's first letter to his student, Timothy, who we would call today a pastor with a new church start. Timothy is in the city of Ephesus and he is trying to keep alive an early faith community that Paul had organized in his travels.

Remember Paul traveled throughout the Roman Empire teaching and gathering people into communities of those who wanted to follow Jesus, not just on their own but together in a faith community—what we would call today a church. After Paul organized a church and went on his way, he wrote letters back to the community encouraging them and offering them guidance as they grew and inevitably faced the challenges faith communities face.

In this letter, Paul is writing to his young friend Timothy to encourage and counsel him. Paul begins his letter, as he sometimes did, by establishing his credentials, he is making himself credible—reminding Timothy why he should listen to him.

Paul makes himself vulnerable and uses himself as an example of a lost sheep who found his way through the grace of God....divine unmerited blessing. Paul tells Timothy that he Paul was “the foremost” of sinners and yet his life was transformed by the power of God’s mercy and grace.

We know this story well....before his dramatic conversion experience, Paul was a pious Jew, very sure of himself and the rightness of his cause which was to find and persecute Christians. And yet, while on the road to Damascus, God knocked Paul off his horse and blinded him until his heart and mind were opened to the grace of Jesus Christ in his life. That call on the road to Damascus, that experience of life-changing grace and his response to it gives Paul the authority to write the things he does to Timothy.

Paul proclaims that he was profoundly undeserving and yet even HE received God’s grace.

And that may be the very nature of grace.

It seems that grace is not earned. We do not receive grace because we deserve it, or acquire it because of our own striving....it is divine UNMERITED blessing. Paul, as he says in this letter to Timothy, was the last person God should have blessed, saved or forgiven—Paul had done horrible things to good God-fearing people. And yet Paul went to his knees on the road to Damascus, struck by God’s blessing and then he was helped, enlightened, called and empowered to spread the Gospel. That is grace.

Paul is offering himself as a case study, an example of God’s grace. His own experience attests to the reality that God’s grace IS divine unmerited blessing. AND, as Paul’s story demonstrates, grace can be overpowering in its intensity and transformative in one’s life.

Listen again to Paul’s words...

*I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me,  
because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service,  
even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.  
But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of  
our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

And so today we ponder the beauty and mystery of God's grace. And grace is both beautiful and mysterious. In all the scholarly literature I have read, grace seems to elude one accepted, working definition. And that is why stumbling upon a succinct definition of grace—almost tossed off by the dance instructor at Kripalu—seemed like a moment of grace itself.

Grace seems to be a paradox...it is all around us but we cannot quite grab it or create it. Maybe we need to simply be open to it—mindful that God is near, and receptive to the movement of the spirit.

Simone Weil, the 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher, Christian mystic and social activist, wrote, *Grace fills empty spaces... it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.*

Maybe that is what's needed...emptiness in our lives, spaces in the busy-ness that allow grace to rush in.

Grace has been referred to as a gift that God is eager to give us...a gift that we can receive over and over again if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to God and open to being touched and blessed.

Frederick Buechner, 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and author writes about life as a party and grace as a gift. Listen to his words:

*The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party would not have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It is for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.*

Weil and Buechner are two of the many esteemed writers and thinkers who have tried to define grace. But it remains a challenge...as I learned when I asked my fancy professor in my fancy divinity school and he fumbled on the answer.

Even Philip Yancey, in his book **WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?** never defines grace—never in the entire book. Yancey circles the airport but he never quite lands.

Yancey does say this, which I found of interest, “Grace [is] ‘the last best word,’ the only unsullied theological word remaining in our language.” He says that other words like love and charity have lost their original theological meaning, but grace has managed to retain the deep and profound meaning that it had in the days of Jesus and the apostles. What is ironic in a book about grace is that Yancey never says what that meaning is.

And maybe that is fine. Maybe the elusive nature of grace, the inability to nail it down and say: that’s it and we all agree, is part of its power. Maybe we can only know grace when we witness or experience it. Yancey says we live in a world of “un-grace.” Maybe that’s why moments of true grace take our breath away.

Maybe it is the lack of consensus out there in theological literature that made the dance instructors’ simple definition of grace take my breath away. Maybe that is why I danced with abandon after she said grace is divine unmerited blessing. Maybe someone finally gave me the words for a feeling I had experienced but not understood. Maybe my stumbling into that dance studio when I felt so out of place was grace.

Paul says in his letter to Timothy, “I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me...”

Maybe the grace of our Lord is overflowing when divine unmerited blessing is so evident before our eyes or so clearly felt in our bones that we cannot find the words to describe it.

Maybe grace is the reality that we don’t NEED words to describe it.

Maybe the best definition of grace is found in examples of when grace was unmistakably present...

The fall of the Berlin Wall one remarkable and euphoric night...

The release of Nelson Mandela after 27 years in prison...

The words of Dr. Martin Luther King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial...

The music of a Mozart Serenade one dreamy night at Tanglewood...

The pride of two sisters at a Soap Box Derby...

The singing of a church family marching together in the Gay Pride parade...

The delight of those swimming in the ocean in the rain at 6 AM at Church Camp...

The tears of those receiving Communion by Intinction last Sunday...

Maybe even my dearly-held definition of grace—divine unmerited blessing—cannot capture the essence of grace. Maybe it is indefinable, indescribable.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Aquinas wrote, *Grace is nothing else but a certain beginning of glory in us.*

MAYBE THAT'S IT! Maybe we only know grace when we feel the beginning of glory rising within us.

Maybe grace is divine unmerited blessing that marks a certain beginning of glory in us.

Or maybe grace is Jesse Sky's face, one hour old, and the faces of his mothers radiating light.

Amen.

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