

From Justice to Grace and Back Again

- Amanda Udis-Kessler, Columbine UU Church, July 24, 2011

Pastoral Prayer

Spirit of life and love, known by so many names, reducible to no single name, beyond us, among us, within us, present in our relationships with one another, we come here today to give and receive, to listen and learn, to cherish and love. Some of us come with heavy hearts. We know we will find comfort here. Some of us come filled with joy. We know others will share our joy here. Some of us come laden with fear. We know that fear can be transformed to love in this place. Some of us come daring to hope for wondrous things. We know that our hope will be embodied here, given hands and feet and hearts and minds to be made into reality. Spirit of life and love, be with us today and all days, in all things, that we might come to live and to serve the world in gratitude, awe, and joy. So may it be.

Reading: The Great Flood (author unknown)

It had been raining for days and days, and a terrible flood had come over the land. The waters rose so high that one man was forced to climb onto the roof of his house.

As the waters rose higher and higher, a man in a rowboat appeared, and told him to get in. "No," replied the man on the roof. "I have faith in the Lord; the Lord will save me." So the man in the rowboat went away. The man on the roof prayed for God to save him.

The waters rose higher and higher, and suddenly a speedboat appeared. "Climb in!" shouted a man in the boat. "No," replied the man on the roof. "I have faith in the Lord; the Lord will save me." So the man in the speedboat went away. The man on the roof prayed for God to save him.

The waters continued to rise. A helicopter appeared and over the loudspeaker, the pilot announced he would lower a rope to the man on the roof. "No," replied the man on the roof. "I have faith in the Lord; the Lord will save me." So the helicopter went away. The man on the roof prayed for God to save him.

The waters rose higher and higher, and eventually they rose so high that the man on the roof drowned.

Upon arriving in heaven, the man marched straight over to God. "Heavenly Father," he said, "I had faith in you, I prayed to you to save me, and yet you did nothing. Why?" God gave him a puzzled look, and replied, "I sent you two boats and a helicopter, what more did you expect?"

I don't know about you, but I love the joke that served as our reading. It's kind of Unitarian Universalist, don't you think? This poor guy is waiting for God to save him from the flood in a dramatic way – maybe a chariot bathed in dazzling light, maybe a whole host of angels. But no.

God, in this joke, is a pragmatic sort of deity who works through human action. I think most Unitarian Universalists would say that the moral of the story is something like the following: if others are drowning, we will have to be God's hands and save them. We will have to be the two boats and the helicopter, or at least we will have to pilot the two boats and the helicopter, so that those who are drowning have a chance of help.

Last week, you thought together about the inevitability of justice. Next week, you will reflect on grace abounding. In some ways, justice and grace might seem like antithetical topics, and in some ways they are. But there are also interesting similarities between them, and indeed, ways in which thinking about justice gets us to the issue of grace, and ways in which reflecting on grace inspires in us a passion for justice.

Before we get to the relationship between justice and grace, though, there are two points I'd like to make. First, while Reverend Halloran will be basing her sermon on the marvelous work of Phillip Gulley, which I highly recommend, the understanding of grace that I'll depend on today is more straightforward. It is simply the idea that God, the universe, or the human spirit, however you understand it, sends boats and helicopters to us as occasions of grace. Good things come our way. That doesn't mean bad things don't happen to us and it certainly doesn't mean the world is fair – far from it. It means that for all that is wrong with the world, from time to time we come to know that something is also deeply right with it. These experiences may not happen often, and they may not last for long, but sometimes we are able to tune into the gifts of grace that enrich our lives and offer us joy. At those times we understand that the universe sent the two boats and the helicopter to save us, and we actually take advantage of them and let them save us.

One other point. It's easy to see how the great flood joke can be worked into a metaphor for grace. But we should also remember that great floods sometimes reveal great injustices. I'm not talking Noah's Ark. I'm talking Katrina. I'm talking the lower-status towns that were more readily sacrificed when the Mississippi flooded recently. Environmental disasters might be what insurance agencies call "acts of God." Or they might be environmental racism and classism. Or both. They might be occasions both for grace and for justice. And as far as I can tell, part of seeking to transform yourselves and the larger community by living lives of integrity, service, and love, as your mission statement puts it so beautifully, is discerning when something is an occasion for grace, when it is an occasion for justice, and when it is both.

It may seem odd to link justice and grace so closely. There are, after all, some important ways in which they differ. Justice is about fairness and equality, which means that it has to have measuring tools and definitions of equivalence. When we say that US whites as a group have roughly ten times the wealth of US Blacks as a group, we have a way to measure that. When we say that high schools for rich kids have light-years more resources than high schools for poor kids, there are yardsticks more precise than light-years to demonstrate the difference. When we say that heterosexual couples who marry legally have over a thousand federal rights that same-sex couples don't have because the country does not legally recognize our marriages, we have empirical proof and can provide lists of the rights. Justice is about equity. It is about comparisons. It often involves narrowing gaps, whether financial gaps, gaps of opportunity, or quality of life gaps. It's no accident that statues of Lady Justice frequently show her holding up a scale. Justice is about balance, exactness, and righteousness.

In contrast, grace throws the scales out and offers extravagant, careless, maybe even inappropriately wild levels of acceptance, care and love. If justice is about getting what you deserve, grace is about getting something wonderful whether or not you deserve it. In fact, the whole point of grace as I understand it is that it is not a reward. You don't have an experience of grace because you were good or because you did something right or because you went crawling on your knees in penitence or because you quit smoking or went to church. Nope. Grace is not like frequent flyer miles. It's more like the free coupons at the supermarket that you can pick up no matter what your salary is and regardless of whether you have a job or whether you belong to six oppressed groups or none. Grace is for all of us poor sods and for all of us people with inherent dignity and worth. Which means that in some sense grace is measured out differently than justice. In fact, it's not measured out at all. There's nothing *measured* about it. That's what makes it grace.

And yet it seems to me that there is a relationship between justice and grace. One way to think about this relationship is to start with some of Amy's insightful comments from last week's sermon about how hard it will be for most of us with privilege and power when justice finally comes. The prophet Amos is pretty harsh about this. As Amy pointed out last week, Amos says that the "Day of the Lord" is going to be awful for those who had the opportunity to live justly and who did not do it. And folks, today, that's us. We will be the ones with a lot to answer for. So how exactly should we be thinking about this? What happens when, to quote Amy, justice wrecks us? And here's my answer: whatever else happens on that day, whatever justice means materially and socially, grace will also come along and say to all of us, you are loved. Grace will send boats and a helicopter when the waters of justice threaten to drown us. Not because we deserve it. Not because we are better than people who are, for example, poorer than us. But because that's just what grace does. Grace says you are loved no matter what. You get to have joy and peace and wonder whether you have lots of privilege or none. Your heart is entwined with the heart of creation regardless of where you fall on the oppression scale.

There's also a more positive way to think about the relationship between justice and grace. Last week, Amy quoted Dr. King, quoting Theodore Parker in turn, about the faith claim that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. I'd say that faith claim is also a claim about grace, and I know Amy would agree. If, as Amy says, "the universe outside of us and the universe within us are one and they are conspiring toward justice," then justice and grace are not so different after all. Working for justice is a way of opening to grace, not just for oneself but for all people. Or, put differently, working for justice is about building and then operating boats and helicopters to rescue people from floods of hatred, violence, xenophobia, racism, and all the other ways we let fear rule our hearts, limit our lives, and destroy our planet.

Part of why justice and grace intertwine so powerfully, I think, is that they share something very important: a divine calling and a human response. Maybe our reactions to injustice are as strong as they are because something holy is working in us, saying "this is not right." Now, it is true that the ways in which we come to hear this call are very human: maybe we are reading the prophet Amos or other biblical prophets. Maybe we are in the middle of a course on social inequality. Maybe we are lying awake at night terrified that the gunshots we hear in the neighborhood are getting closer. Maybe it's that moment when we suddenly realize how exactly

we are “different” from the other boys or the other girls and we understand what that has to do with all the taunting we’ve been getting. Maybe we make a sexist joke and the person we tell it to says, “That’s not funny. Would you tell your daughter that joke?” These are all different situations, but if we are awake and aware during them sooner or later we will hear that quiet but insistent demand: something is very, very wrong here. How will you respond? And since God has no hands but ours, we must be the ones to respond by working for justice, by striving to bend the moral arc of the universe in the direction of fairness and equality and human flourishing.

Grace is similarly a moment in which we have an experience, a sense of acceptance, a gift from the universe, a boat or a helicopter if you will, and this experience comes unbidden and from beyond us. It might be a friend calling from out of the blue just when we need it the most. It might be a piece of music that cracks open our defenses and bathes us in wonder. It might be a casserole waiting on our doorstep when we get home from the funeral. It might even just be a sense, completely inexplicable, that we are absolutely fine the way we are. But whatever our encounter with grace, a response is called for. If we are awake, if we are aware, if we understand what is happening, the only possible response I can imagine is simple gratitude. Unless, of course, we are waiting for something better than a dinky rowboat or a pathetic little speedboat or a garden-variety helicopter. But hopefully most of us are doing our best to wake up and be present and accounted for in case some serious grace should come our way. And if we are doing our best to wake up, I think the response that will be called forth from us will in fact be gratitude.

And something else will be called forth from us as well, I believe, an invitation to be a boat or a helicopter of grace, and maybe even a boat or a helicopter of justice. Because in those moments when we experience uncalled-for, boundless, even careless gifts of love from the universe, our gratitude may well include a desire to keep the gifts of love moving forward. It’s easy to see how that might look like taking care of a friend or forgiving an enemy or paying for the fast-food meal of the person behind us in line or bringing a bag of food to a food pantry. But there’s a bigger way to keep the love moving forward and sometimes that way calls us too.

Maybe, in the middle of our experience of extravagant love and acceptance, we remember that racism causes children of color to hate themselves and wish that they were white. And maybe, if we remember that, we resolve to become part of the solution, part of building a world in which no one hates himself for the color of his skin. And then we get moving on it.

Maybe, in the middle of our gratitude, we remember how many physically, sexually, and emotionally assaulted women are still just trying to feel normal and have no idea when they might get back to grateful. And maybe, if we remember that, we work to help these women to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, their inherent worth and dignity, and then to make life-changing decisions based on that knowledge.

Maybe, in the middle of that tender hand-holding with our beloved, the moment that convinces us that the sacred blesses human contact, we remember how many lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people are catcalled, beaten, and murdered, maybe for something no more than holding hands with a sweetheart or walking publicly in clothes that feel natural. And maybe, if we remember that, we speak up, take a stand, teach our children to accept all forms of love and all

gender identities, and get active telling others about how it's hard to know your inherent worth and dignity when someone is spitting on you and calling you a faggot.

I don't think that we get from grace in the abstract to justice in the abstract. Instead, we get from a moment of grace that is particular and peculiar to us, to a moment in which we understand that society denies exactly that grace to someone else because of the social group that they find themselves in. And in that moment, grateful for whatever or whoever it was that blessed us, we want to become that blessing for someone else. Someone who may not be able to believe in grace all that much at the moment.

Having been airlifted from the roof before the flood hits, we want to give thanks for our life and go on to airlift the next person, or the next community, or the next social group, into a place of safety and rejoicing. Having had our brokenness bound up, we want to build a land where we bind up the broken. Having been set free from our captivity, we want to build a land where the captives go free. Having had good tidings brought to us when we were afflicted, we want to build a land where we bring the good tidings to those who still are afflicted and to those who mourn. Here's a version of Amos' quote that partakes of both justice and grace: Come build a land where sisters and brothers anointed by God – there's the grace – may then create peace – there's the justice. And so when we ache for justice to roll down like waters and peace like an ever-flowing stream we ache just as much for that anointing, for that blessing, for those boats and helicopters. We yearn for it all, knowing that somehow, somewhere, justice and grace bless each other.

Finally, it is not just grace and justice that engage in a holy kiss; gratitude is in the mix as well. When we sing, "For All that Is Our Life" we are acknowledging both the gift of life, perhaps the deepest and most ultimate grace that we are given, and the reality that we are called to use that gift, that grace, "to build the common good and make our own days glad." In other words, to make justice for both others and ourselves. Here we move from grace to justice. And what should our response be to both this gift and this vocation, this calling into justice? "To sing our thanks and praise." In other words, to be grateful. Here we move from grace to gratitude. Justice, grace, and gratitude: there's a holy trinity that Unitarian Universalists can get behind!

So as we move through our days, may we come to know, accept, and be grateful for the boats and helicopters that come for us rather than rejecting them out of hand. May we build the common good and make our own days glad, ever mindful that the justice and righteousness warned of by Amos may come to us instead as a blessing, as an anointing. May we become boats and helicopters for the many who face the rising waters of poverty, despair, discrimination, and self-hatred. And may we find peace in our conviction that grace, justice, and gratitude are working in us, among us, and beyond us, so that one day that long arc of the universe may cease bending toward justice and find itself resting in the very heart of justice instead. Amen, and blessed be.