

“The Word of Grace and Truth”
January 4, 2009

Jeremiah 31:7-14
John 1:10-18

From the prophet Jeremiah, we hear that God proclaims to the nations, “Their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. I will turn their mourning into joy, and I will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow.”

From the Gospel of John, we hear, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory ... full of grace and truth.”

From the Rev. Bill McKinney, on the back of the order of worship this morning, we hear, “Growth [within the United Church of Christ] will come as members and local churches develop new confidence in their religious messages.”

So let me ask you, does Jeremiah or the Gospel of John offer you a religious message today that you have any confidence in, new or old?

Would you be willing to tell your neighbor, co-worker, parent, or child ... would you be willing to tell the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker ... would you be willing to tell *anyone* you have confidence that there is a God, a Spirit of all Creation, who has promised to turn the mourning of the peoples of the world into joy and who has promised comfort for our sorrow? And whether or not you’d be willing to *tell* anyone about it, do you have confidence that there is something – call it God or Spirit or divine energy or anything else – that has been at work throughout human history and throughout your own life, seeking to make the cosmos like a watered garden that never languishes? [Pause.] What do you think? Where’s your confidence level on that one?

And what about this ... do you have any confidence at all in the message from the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us. [W]e have seen his glory ... full of grace and truth. [G]race and truth came through Jesus Christ.” [Pause.] Any confidence? This much? [Fingers close together.] This much? (Hands apart.) This much? (Arms far apart.)

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On this first Sunday of 2009, what religious messages *can* this congregation offer to a world that is in great need of some good news? Perhaps more to the point, on this, the 11th day of *Christmas*, what does this congregation have to say to Sonoma, to California, and to the rest of the world about the one whose birth we celebrated just a few days ago, the one known as Jesus and proclaimed as the Christ, God’s anointed one?

The Gospel of John has a ready-made answer to those questions: Jesus was and is the Word of God, the one through whom the world came into being and through whom grace and truth came into the world. John’s answer, John’s message, may have the ring of familiarity, but it may at the same time lack the gift of understandability. John’s message may have the allure of the poetic and the mysterious, but it may also be missing the appeal of humility and what we might call interfaith respect.

In this tapestry of a difficult yet familiar explanation, poetic mystery, and supreme confidence, is there any message this congregation can claim as its own? Is there any meaning in Jesus Christ as the Word of God who brings grace and truth to the world that

this church can share with confidence, joy, and courage? Is there something about the man from Nazareth that gripped the hearts and minds and changed the lives of his earliest followers in Judea and Galilee that can capture hearts and minds and transform lives here and now? Is there a revelation of God, of the Holy, in and through Jesus, a revelation that has brought healing and love and wisdom into this church for generation after generation? Is there some way this congregation can actually *join* John in saying to the world, “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ, the Word of God”?

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Even if we sidestep, for now, the tricky theological question of what it might mean to be the *Word* of God, we’re still left with the problem of understanding “grace” and “truth.” And as the children and I found several minutes ago, trying to define or understand “grace” is mighty hard, and then, especially in a congregational church, coming to an understanding that *everyone* can embrace is probably impossible. So, instead of using this pulpit to tell you, definitively, what grace is and how it came through Jesus, I want to use this pulpit to make an offering, nothing more and nothing less than an offering.

Christian tradition has sometimes described grace as an *undeserved* gift or blessing from God, but I think that misses the mark because it suggests humanity does not *deserve* to be loved or blessed or cared for. I, for one, believe humanity and all the rest of life on earth (and elsewhere) do deserve love and blessing and care. That’s one of the gifts of the first creation story in the Book of Genesis – the message that God moved over the waters of chaos, brought forth life of all kinds, and then declared it “good, very good.”

So I don’t experience grace as an *undeserved* gift of God. I understand and experience grace as the *unearned* gift and blessing of the Holy – in my life, in your life, and in all of life. As the children and I discussed, we didn’t do anything to earn the beauty of a sunny morning. After days of fog and rain, we may have had to work to keep hoping that the sun would return, but we don’t have to *earn* its return.

I understand grace as what was at work in the world that brought Chey into my life close to 30 years ago. I met her because I moved into the apartment next to hers in El Cerrito, California. I moved into the apartment next to hers in El Cerrito because I couldn’t find a place to live closer to the law school in Berkeley that would take me and my cat. I had a cat because I had a friend in college whose cat had had kittens. I was in law school because I had parents who valued education and encouraged my dreams. (I was also in law school, to be honest, because I loved *Perry Mason*.) It was only because of a seemingly endless stream of great and small graces that Chey and I even had a chance to meet.

Now, I may have had to respond to each gift of grace, to receive it, in order to be blessed with the next one. But I didn’t *earn* any of those gifts. None of that grace was a reward for good behavior. None of it was the result a bargain between me and God ... or between me and the gods of law school and romance. They were all gifts of God’s grace, just as surely as a beautiful day and the kindness of a stranger and the laughter of a child are all gifts of God’s never-ending grace.

We may have to earn a living. We may have to earn one another’s trust and respect. We may have to work for the opportunity do things like going to law school or pursuing any other vocation. But ... but our ability to do any of that earning or working

is a gift. Our abilities to breathe and love and think, our abilities to learn and imagine and create – in the kitchen, in the classroom, on the computer, and in the workshop – all these are gifts of grace, freely given by the Living God.

And where, we might ask, is Jesus in all of this? What does Jesus have to do with this, so that it makes any sense for the Gospel of John to proclaim that grace (and truth) came through Jesus Christ? If grace is the freely-given blessing of God, where, oh where, does Jesus fit in?

Well, here's one thought ... or several, really. Jesus was born into a time and place in which trying to earn God's favor ("God" with a capital "G") or to earn the favor of any number of gods was a central fact of life for many, if not most people. And it wasn't only a fact of life for Jesus, his family, and his followers as Jews who made pilgrimages to Jerusalem and sacrifices in the Temple. Earning the favor and blessings of all sorts of gods was a daily activity throughout the Roman Empire. The gods of one's household, the gods of one's city, the gods of one's ancestors, the gods of the empire, and the great god *of* the empire, the Emperor himself, all required offerings, oblations, sacrifices, and more. In Jerusalem, in Corinth, in Thessalonica, Philippi, Ephesus, Rome, and beyond, one had to *earn* the favor of God or the gods, and, at times, earning that favor could seem like a full-time job in itself.

That was then. What about now? Well, I hate to break the news to you, but now is still a time and place in which trying to earn the favor of the gods, trying to prove oneself worthy, is still close to a full-time job.

Now, if you're tempted to think that you or we have outgrown the belief that we must win divine favor or prove ourselves worthy of blessing and grace, consider this. Why do so many of us cling to what we have – our possessions, our jobs, our accomplishments – as if we would be nothing, as if we would be worthless (literally, "worth less") without them? Why do so many of us think we have to be *doing* something all the time? Why do so many of us think we must say yes to almost every request for help or service – *or* for play or entertainment, for that matter – that comes our way? Why do so many people seem so driven, so desperate for recognition, so desperate for love and acknowledgement, if we as a people or a culture truly have left behind the notion that we must earn our place on earth and we must earn God's love, care, and protection?

We still need the Word of grace and truth that came and continues to come through Jesus. We still need the Word of grace and truth comes through the Jesus of the Gospels and through the living Christ of faith and prayer. And that Word still comes, despite the limits and distortions visible in the Gospels, the Bible, the church, the Christian tradition, and our lives. The Word comes with grace ... and the truth that grace is freely given, ours to receive, but never ours to earn. The Word comes with grace ... and the truth that grace is freely given *to all*, that it is everyone's to receive, but never anyone's to earn. The Word comes with grace ... and the truth that all people and all creation are beloved of God. The Word comes with both the *gift* of love and the *call* to love as fully as we are loved.

This is the Word of God I encounter in and through Jesus. I believe it is the Word of God countless others have encountered in and through Jesus, *and* I also believe it is the Word of a God who is not limited to any one religious tradition, to any one people, or to any one way of knowing.

This is one of the religious messages in which *I* have confidence. And where does your confidence lie? What message can this congregation confidently and boldly share in this time and place? You must discover and embrace the message that speaks the word of grace and truth in your own hearts, and this congregation, as a community, must always be seeking to discover and embrace the word of God that speaks grace and truth into your collective heart of faith. The work of that discovering is yours and ours to do together, and it is endless, *joyously* endless work.

Although the work of discovery will continue, I'd like to close this morning by naming three words of grace and truth I see and hear this congregation embracing with confidence.

The first is what this church says to the world symbolically through the two signs along West Spain Street, the signs that say, "First Congregational Church" and "Congregation Shir Shalom." In those signs and in the congregation's life, this church confidently says to all who would listen, "We stand together with another people of faith. We stand together, honoring our differences and embracing our common humanity. We stand together, brothers and sisters, equally beloved and blessed by God."

The second is in what this congregation says to the world by being an Open and Affirming church. Since 2001, this congregation has said clearly and with confidence that it believes, as Peter preached in the Book of Acts, "Truly, God shows no partiality." This congregation, echoing the words of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, confidently and with joy says to the world, "In Christ, in God, there is no male or female, no Jew or Gentile, no gay or straight, for we are all one in Christ and in God."

And the third is in the United Church of Christ slogan, "Never put a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking!" I hear this congregation saying, in so many different ways, that the Holy One who spoke through Moses, through the prophets, through Jesus, and through the apostles is still seeking to speak ... through you, through me, through the stranger, and even through one we would consider an enemy. I hear this congregation confidently sharing the message, at least with one another, that the Holy One may indeed be speaking through this very congregation and that we need to be attentive to what new words She or He may be offering.

Listen to the Spirit, my beloved brothers and sisters. Listen to the Spirit, to one another, and to yourself, and be willing to share the words of grace and truth that you hear.

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
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