

# *“Grace in Unexpected Places”*

*(Part VI of VI in the series “Grace”)*

*Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20*

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*December 24, 2018  
11 p.m.*

From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Christmas Eve, December 24, 2018, 11 p.m. service, dedicated to all the world's refugees tonight in search of a safe place to call home, to Nasra, Hyat, Kileopatra, Rigat, Letina and Million who are finding a home in Columbus, and to CRIS and the First Church team of welcome under the leadership of Teresa Polo and Antionette Beynen, and always to the glory of God!

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This is the final sermon of six that Rev. Corzine and I have offered during Advent and Christmas on “Grace.” We hope that through these sermons and the “Grace Notes” you have received since December 2 that this season has opened to you in new ways. You can access all these sermons on-line at our website. The first four are printed and can be found at the exits/information racks tonight. Thank you....

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*Let us pray: Mat the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our salvation. Amen.*

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“**A Moral Disaster**” the headline of The Columbus Dispatch read yesterday in the “Nation and World” section. The sub-headline read “*Hardened Approach leaves 14,300 migrant children in US detention centers.*” Decades after our nation stopped institutionalizing children because large and overcrowded orphanages were known to cause lasting trauma, our federal government has placed most of the 14,300 migrant toddlers, infants, children and teens coming across our southern border in detention centers and residential facilities packed with hundreds and sometimes thousands of children.

As our Christ-child is born again into the world this night, at least 5400 children are sleeping in shelters with more than 1,000 other children. Another 9,800 are in facilities with over 100 kids. In the last two years we have gone from 2,720 children held by the government to 14,300. And we have only found out about all of this through confidential documents leaked to the American public.

This is all a disgrace. It is graceless – in all imaginable ways. No matter how you feel about border walls, caravans of migrants/refugees coming to our country, to imprison toddlers, infants, children and teens and separate them from their parents is unacceptable. We are better than this.

Our nation's leadership has lost any semblance of a moral compass. While conservative leaders and media pundits lecture and often mock our nation on how to address this Holiday - saying "Merry Christmas" rather than "Happy Holidays" - I say "actions speak louder than words" as some of the same men and women support the imprisonment of Christian children and Christian parents for simply seeking asylum and shelter the storms of their lives.

If this was Egypt's border and Jesus, Joseph and Mary were arriving today running for their lives from Herod the King – the newborn Christ (for whom Christmas is named after all) would have been separated from his mother and father and placed in a containment facility. Grace is nowhere present in the midst of this moral disaster.

There are tears are dropping from the cheeks of Lady Liberty's statue, drenching these words at the base of her magnificence:  
*"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore."*

**So, where is God's grace in the midst of this moral disaster?** I can't see it. Can you – this Christmas eve?

But Christmas comes in spite of such moral disaster. Grace is born to us this night blowing away the un-grace and unkindness of all spirits that stand in the path of grace. Quite frankly, Grace is found and experienced in unexpected places coming from unexpected people sharing love in new and unexpected ways. Grace is found in people rising and resisting and welcoming our global neighbors seeking home in our midst.

Such Grace is alive at First Church this Christmas. Twenty-five people have strapped on their moral compasses and gathered together under the leadership of Teresa Polo and Antoinette Beynen to offer grace, love and welcome to six people in three families arriving from Eritrea. We are actually receiving those who are yearning to breathe free. In one sense, we are all a part of our Refugee Resettlement team.

Our six new Americans from Eritrea are Nasra, Hyat, Kileopatra, Rigat, Letina and Million. Like Jesus, Mary and Joseph before them, Nasra and Hyat came through Egypt seeking refuge from torture, ransom, imprisonment and the threat of death. Rigat, Kili, Letina and Million came through the Sudan and Ethiopia. All lived 7-10 years in refugee camps. The children all grew up in the camps. Two are Muslims and four are Christians. All are beautiful and beloved children of God. All reflect to us the love of God and the amazing resilience of the human spirit in the face to horror and abuse.

At a Christmas party Teresa held for the families recently, everyone present realized the children of our new friends had never experienced Christmas gift giving/receiving before. Once the children realized the gifts could be opened and were actually for them, they lit up with joy and delight! Christmas came alive for everyone!

Grace was experienced in the unexpected reality of Christmas come alive – a reality no one had imagined one year earlier.

**Grace will not be stopped this Christmas!** Yesterday in the New York Times, Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, who has served in the previous three Republican administrations, wrote a beautiful opinion editorial piece entitled, *“The Uncommon Power of Grace: A*

*revolutionary idea lies at its core: radical equality.*” Mr. Wehner wrote of the distinctive nature of Grace in our Christian religion.

He told the story from Philip Yancey’s book, *“What’s So Amazing About Grace?”* in which Yancey spoke of a conference on comparative religions where experts from around the world debated which belief, if any, was unique to the Christian faith. C.S. Lewis happened to enter the room during the discussion. When he was told the topic was Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions, Lewis responded: *“Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”*

C.S. Lewis was right. No other religion places Grace at its theological center. Grace was a revolutionary idea which “seems to go against every instinct of humanity.” We are naturally drawn to covenants and karma, to cause and effect, to earning what we receive.

**Grace is so different.** It is the unmerited favor of God. Grace is God’s unconditional love given to the undeserving. It’s a difficult concept to understand because it isn’t entirely rational. In the words of Bono, the lead singer and song writer for U2, *“Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions.”*

There's a radical equality at the core of grace. None of us are deserving of God's grace, so it's not dependent on social status, wealth or intelligence. There is equality between kings and peasants, the prominent and the unheralded, rule followers and rule breakers.

Peter Wehner continues, *“People who have been captured by grace are different. They love us despite our messy lives, stay connected to us through our struggles, always holding out the hope of redemption. When relationships are broken, it's grace that causes people not to give up, to extend the invitation to reconnect, to work through misunderstandings with sensitivity and transparency. You don't sense hard edges, dogmatism or self-righteous judgment from gracious people. There's a tenderness about them that opens doors that had previously been bolted shut. People who have been transformed by grace have a special place in their hearts for those living in the shadows of society. They're easily moved by stories of suffering and step into the breach to heal. And grace properly understood always produces gratitude.”*

So here we are as Christmas breaks into our lives once again. God has given us the gift of grace wrapped in swaddling cloth and lying in the manger, because there is no room in the Inn. We are called to kneel in Bethlehem again.

In the midst of our nation's moral disaster, violence that rises up like the north wind on a winter night and times that would try women's and men's souls, **let us be people of grace.** Let us run counter to un-grace and dis-grace. May we be grace for others. May we receive grace from others. May we follow our Savior who brought grace and unconditional love. Let us come and adore the son of God, our "dawn of redeeming grace" born to set us free and grant us Grace. Amen.

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