

“Grace in a Feed Trough”

(Part V of VI Part series – “Grace”)

Luke 2:1-20

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

December 24, 2018

7:30 p.m.

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Christmas Eve, December 24, 2018, 7:30 p.m., dedicated to Marge Parsons who passed to eternal life on December 19, to Marty Worth on her birthday and in grateful thanks for years of service to our church, to Miles Benjamin Robertson as he is baptized into Christian faith and to all the members and staff of First Church – past and present – who have lived and loved and carried forth the Gospel of Love for over 166 years and always to the glory of God!

“Grace in a Feed Trough”

(Part V of VI Part series – “Grace”)

Luke 2:1-20

Grace has been winding its way through the landscape of our lives this Advent season. Tonight, grace arrives with us in Bethlehem. Let us watch for Grace here at beside the feed trough – the manger of Bethlehem.

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

Grace comes to us when we most need it and least expect it. It often is lost to us in when we caught up in our “own stuff.”

On this night, long ago, “Grace” was born in a barn and laid in a feed trough. Grace was named Jesus. And as we know from the first words of the Gospel of John, Jesus was born into the world *“full of grace and truth”* (John 1:1).

He was born to parents who didn’t have much going for them. He was tiny and fragile. His life was threatened within days of his birth. He was a refugee within weeks of being born. He fled for his life in the arms of his mother and with his father guiding their way through the foreboding mountainous deserts of southern Palestine to freedom in northern Egypt.

On this night, long ago, out of the silence of the night, he reached up and reached out and touched our world with his tiny fingers. His was the embrace of Grace. He was the embodiment of Grace. He was newborn and yet eternal.

He reaches up and reaches out still. If you and I reach back, we will receive the gift of life and his embrace of Grace will change our lives. It is that simple.

The world doesn't always get this. He is often portrayed as someone or something he is not. His life, his story and his image should never be traded in for cash value. If we try to commercialize him, we fail him. If we try to market his value, we miss the point of his coming into our lives. All we need to do is receive him as God's gift of grace in our lives. We need to open our hearts to him. We need to receive his tiny hand of grace reaching up and touching ours.

So how do we do this? How do we accept the gift of grace that comes to us from God in a baby born in barn and laid in a feed trough? We do it through the grace of God.

Let me tell you a story of God's grace tonight. It is a story of a cat and a man told by the late (great) preacher, Fred Craddock.

A family was driving along a country road and the children spotted a kitten in the tall weeds by the side of the road. The kitten looked quite sick. "Stop", they all yelled. They wanted to take the cat home. The father protested. "*We have a zoo at home already. There is no room in our home for*

one more animal.” But the children’s begging finally got to him (and so did his wife’s sideward look).

He reversed the car, right there in the middle of the road, turned around and got out to pick up the kitten. The cat was emaciated. Its ribs were showing. You could tell that it had not eaten in ages. The fur was matted and there were wounds. He reached out to pick the kitten up and it took a swipe at him. Frightened and dying, the cat mustered its last bit of energy and hissed and growled. The dad became frustrated and started to walk away. But he looked at his children’s pleading eyes. So, he picked up the cat by the scruff of the neck and wrapped it in his jacket. When they arrived home the father insisted on making a place for the cat in the parent’s room so that the rest of the animals in the “zoo” didn’t bother him. There he could heal and be restored to health.

It didn’t take very long before that cat became strong and beautiful. One day the father was alone with the cat. He looked around to see if anyone was watching and then he gently put his hand down in front of the cat. Instead of being scratched and cut by the claws of the cat, that cat just nuzzled up against his hand and began to purr.

Fred Craddock reflects, *“I imagine that when God reaches out to each one of us, we see that God’s hands are covered with scars and scratch marks. And for us, Jesus is really God’s hand reaching to us today. We see his hands scared and torn, but we need to reach back and embrace his hand of love and grace.”*

God never gives up on us. God loves us - - even at the ugliest times of our lives. Even when we snarl and swing at God and the people around us. God doesn’t give up. God never gives up.

With God, it is more than “being kind.” It is grace. Grace never gives up. It is more than kindness. We can be kind to a person we meet who is hungry and homeless; to an animal we meet by the side of the road.

Grace is different. Grace is more than an act of charity. Grace *elevates* the one you are showing grace toward. God’s grace toward us puts us on a whole new level: God now judges us as if we had never sinned, through the filter of God’s Son Jesus. That’s quite different than God deciding to be kind toward us. Through Grace, God nurtures us to transformation. And our God never gives up on us.

So, if there is someone this Christmas Eve you have been hurt by, who has scratched and scared you in word or deed, I pray that the grace of God come upon you and grow in you. I pray

that you reach out your hand, scared and covered with scratches, one more time. I pray, that by the grace of God, you find way to reach out – just like our newborn savior reached out of the manger so many years ago and reaches still... and allow the healing touch of God to heal you.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ keep your heart and mind ever growing and ever reaching out to others in God's love. Merry Christmas. Amen.

Copyright 2018, First Congregational Church, UCC