

*A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 4, 2009, Christmas 2, dedicated to my parents, Herman C. and Lorene K. Ahrens, to my sister Deborah K. Ahrens, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Full of Grace and Truth”**

### **Isaiah 60: 1-6; John 1: 10-18**

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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.

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*“The word became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14).*

As Jesus came among us to dwell with us, one of the striking patterns of his life is this: The more unsavory the characters, the more at ease they felt with Jesus. People like these found Jesus appealing: a Samaritan social outcast, a military officer of the tyrant Herod (read Hitler for a more contemporary understanding), a chiseling tax collector, a prostitute, and the list goes on . . . On the other hand, more respectable folks of his times, like the pious Pharisees, the rich young ruler, and even the open-minded Nicodemus struggled to establish relationships with him. Today, the patterns have changed. The respectable seek him and the outcasts stay away from Jesus and his followers.

In *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey tells a story of a friend who worked with people on the streets of Chicago. A prostitute came to him in wretched straits, homeless, health failing, and unable to buy food for her 2-year-old daughter. Her eyes awash in tears, she

confessed she had been “renting her daughter” to men to support her drug habit. Phil’s friend could hardly bear hearing this sordid and horrid tale. He listened in silence, not knowing what to say. Finally, he asked if she had ever thought of going to church for help. He was stunned by the look of pure astonishment that crossed her face. “Church,” she cried, “Why would I ever go there? They would just make me feel worse than I already do!” (Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1995, pp. 147-148). **God help us all!**

*“The word Became flesh and lived among us full of **grace and truth.**”*

**Grace and truth.** What do these words that haunt and permeate the writing of John mean to us today? Like “the word” and “glory,” “grace and truth” are John’s words for ultimate meaning in relation to Jesus Christ. How do we experience and encounter grace and truth?

**"Grace"** is the overarching term for all of God's gifts to humanity, all of God’s blessings of salvation, all events through which God manifests all of God's amazing self-giving. Grace is a divine attribute revealing the heart of the one God, the premise for all spiritual blessings. Grace is the favor shown by God to sinners. It is, if you will, the divine goodwill offered to those who neither inherently deserve grace or can ever hope to earn it. It is God's divine disposition to work in our hearts, our wills, our actions, so as actively to communicate God's own self-giving love for all humanity. (Paraphrased from Thomas C. Oden's *The Transforming Power of Grace*, p. 33). **Grace is everything and everywhere!**

Grace also is beautiful. We think of grace when we think of dancers rising heavenward in flight and movement. It is the spirit of God that takes us out of ourselves and into a place of peace and hope. Grace is relational. It is for all people and is initiated by God.

But, unfortunately, for those who need things neat, clean, organized and well-labeled, defining grace can be frustrating to pin

down. Just as the Holy Spirit flows freely in our lives, the nature of grace is its liveliness, its presence in the experience of life, and its amazing delight in the open spaces, ragged edges and endless possibilities of life and faith.

Brazilian Liberation Theologian, Leonardo Boff, describes grace this way:

*We can never talk about grace itself because it shows up in this particular thing or that particular thing . . . Grace is not something isolated in itself that stands apart from others things. Grace is a mode of being that things take on when they come into contact with the love of God and are suffused with God's mystery. In that sense, the whole world is related to grace. (L. Boff, *Liberating Grace*, trans. J. Drury, Orbis Books, 1979, p. 29)*

The whole world is related to grace! Imagine that! "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," as the Apostle Paul calls it, is Christianity's best gift to the world. It is a spiritual nova in our midst exerting a force greater than vengeance, stronger than racism, stronger than hate. But sadly, as the prostitute of Chicago's streets and too much of the world hungering for grace experiences, we in the church universal too often presents un-grace and dis-grace. Too often we resemble the grim folk who scare unbelievers away because of our severity and lack of hospitality; because of our rules and regulations and our captivity to traditions that have worn huge holes in the soul of the grace-clothed Body of Christ! As the "God is Still Speaking" ad campaign recently said, "O Come *SOME* of ye faithful . . ." Our message to the world from the UCC was, you are welcome here even if you are not welcome by others in the Christian communion. However, we are far from perfect where grace is involved.

**Too often, we become what we say we've left behind.** H.L. Mencken once described a Puritan as a person with a haunting fear that someone, somewhere is happy. Today, many people would apply that description to all too many joyless and uptight Christians of every denominational stripe and condition.

Mark Twain used to say that he once tried an experiment of putting a dog and cat in a cage together. After some adjustments, they got along. So he added a bird, a pig and goat. Again after some initial adjustments, they got along. Then he put in a Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Catholic, and within minutes there was not a living thing left. (Quoted in Phillip Yancey's *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1997, p. 33).

The whole world is watching what we do. Will they know we are Christians by our love or will they know we have become culturally captive by our un-love and the body of evidence pointing to a lack of grace and truth?

**TRUTH** we meet over and over again in John's Gospel. Jesus is the embodiment of truth. To see truth we must look at Jesus – open to all people, loving of those we are unloved, struggling with those who think they know everything already. He communicates truth in every word and action. He leaves his Holy Spirit with us to guide us into truth once he ascends to heaven. He frees us with truth, although we too often resent the truth he offers. Truth is the very essence of Jesus the Christ. Such truth can comfort and disturb us. It can strengthen our faith and shake it to the foundations. Such truth is often too much for us to soak in.

In this world – and in Christ's church – where un-grace has taken root and truth has been candy-coated with feel good music and “feel even better” sermons, the lack of grace and truth has diminished our greatest guide in Christ Jesus.

We need to take account of the amazing gift God has given us and be embraced by this gift of grace and truth! We can no longer reduce the church to spreadsheet operations. Number counting and number crunching cannot measure personal maturation and spiritual growth. We cannot simply focus on techniques or quantifiable returns as opposed to spiritual empowerment and growth as God's graced ones.

For when the church becomes culturally captive and goes directly against the stream of Christian teachings of grace, we lose our greatest gift – God's Grace! In this era when performance-oriented religion has replaced the profoundly subtle humility of grace-guided spirituality and action, the church is in danger of losing its soul! And in the 50-year-old words of Helmut Theilicke, in his classic *The Waiting Father*, "the devil succeeds in laying his cuckoo eggs in a pious nest . . . (for) the sulphurous stench of hell is as nothing compared with the evil odor emitted by divine grace gone putrid." (Found in Theilicke, p. 133) Ultimately, we cannot let the devil succeed in quenching grace. We cannot allow divine grace to emit odors of putrid despair.

For all our problems in Christian faith, for all our missed opportunities to embrace God's grace, for all our maddening tendencies to replicate the un-grace of the world and misdeeds of casting shadows upon God's amazing grace, we know it is here in the embrace of God's grace and in the midst of the faith community that we hope against hope and we continue to grow hungry for love, for meaning in our lives, for grace to heal us.

It is true what was said by the dying country priest in George Barnanos' novel *Diary of a Country Priest*: "Does it really matter? . . . Grace is everywhere!" The question becomes for us, how will we be a part of the movement of 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians leading us back to recognize, to receive, to embody, to share, to live unconditionally in God's grace, which is everywhere? God knows we need to be embraced by grace.

In *Faust*, Goethe writes: "What you have as heritage, take now as task, for thus you will make it your own." Our heritage is grace and truth in Christ Jesus our Lord. He is, in the words of Hebrews, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." As was true with Jesus, may we be full of grace and truth as we live into God's more perfect way. Amen.

