

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

11.9.14 Sermon: “Rescued by Love”

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

Judging from the morose Facebook posts I’ve seen, I’m sensing more than a few here today are still hurting from the election results Tuesday night and Wednesday morning. As a liberal Democrat myself, I could only stomach a little of the chatter Tuesday night and had to turn it off. With Republican controlled Senates in Washington DC and in Albany, I doubt Interfaith Impact will be able to move the living wage and women’s reproductive rights initiatives many of us support.

Now, I also want to recognize the Republicans in the congregation who are celebrating getting control of both houses in Washington and one here in New York. I do hope we can work together on social issues that really shouldn’t be Democrat or Republican issues anyway. They are at root freedom and fairness issues before they are partisan issues. And I dearly hope we can move forward on preventing climate change getting any worse than we know it will be.

Be that as it may, a reversal of political fortunes and access to power pale before the death of a child. You may have [read in the paper](#) about the death of 21 year-old Benjamin Van Zandt in solitary confinement. I ended up leading his memorial service at the request of his parents on Friday afternoon. Sitting with their grief in my office Wednesday afternoon temporarily erased my worries about politics. My heart goes out to them for their loss and I hope the service provided them with some comfort for the long grieving road ahead. The death of a child is at the top of the grief list for most difficult losses.

Bereavement like theirs can be a significant test of any theology of grace. Where was grace in their loss? Ben took his own life. Why didn’t God reach out and lift his spirits, stay his hand?

And what about the election? Where was grace in that? I may not have an answer for Ben but I do have an answer about the election. Anne Savage was elected to the School Board! I hope both Democrat and Republican can celebrate the election of one of our members to office.

Another answer to the “Where was Grace?” question I’d like to consider this morning is, grace might have been there but the message wasn’t received.

ABC news did an interesting experiment a few years ago. They hired several seven year old child actors to stand on a New York City street corner looking very distressed to see who would stop and help. They were careful to have plain clothed police officers observing the scene and their parents watching from a remote viewing station. Being actors they did a wonderful job of

looking very distressed, but almost no one stopped to ask what was wrong. Out of 1600 or so people who walked by about 50 stopped to help.

I bet if they ran that experiment here, more people would stop. I'm sure many of us have walked the busy streets in New York City. People mind their own business, and don't pay attention to each other, hardened by being scammed by creative beggars and con-artists. Still, it is a sad commentary that so few stopped.

ABC news asked people who didn't stop if they noticed the actors. Many said they did notice the child, sensed their distress but decided it wasn't a situation they felt comfortable addressing themselves. A few stopped a nearby police officer and pointed the child out to them. Still most chose to ignore the inner urge to respond.

As we know [from the story](#), the Samaritan did respond to the injured man on the road. The order of service cover gives you an artistic rendering of that encounter. Alyssa finds great art for the cover doesn't she? When we read or hear this story, we mostly think about the Samaritan as a model for us rather than the two who pass by and don't want to get involved. Today, just for a moment, I encourage you to take the perspective of the robbed and injured man on the road.

Lying naked and wounded, half dead, he is probably thinking he just might die from exposure and his injuries. If anyone needs saving, it would be him. When the Samaritan stops to help him, his prayers are answered many times over. I'd argue for him, the Samaritan is an agent of God's grace. Compassion moved the Samaritan to take the risk of robbers still lurking ready to attack him as well. That compassion might have moved the other two to act ... but it didn't. Why one rather than the others? Chance? Conditioning? Fellow feeling and appreciation? Much to ponder that remains unanswered in the story.

Now for a completely different kind of grace story that almost seems too ordinary to qualify. But I wonder if it does.

Some of you may know I tried a different dental group a couple of years ago. The hygienist shrank in horror looking at my mouth as I have some gum recession and bone loss from a time in my life I deeply regret when I wasn't taking proper care of my teeth. She got me to do my first deep cleaning to see if my gums might attach a little better. It wasn't much fun as many of you already know.

This focus on the pockets in my gums where bacteria can breed got me to buy a fancy sonic toothbrush and clean up my dental act. But I was still having some problems. I don't remember why it came up in conversation but [Kiva Sprissler](#), Amy Lent's daughter and the woman who gives me regular therapeutic massage to help me manage the damage to my body from old

injuries, told me about an unusual kind of toothpaste from Asia called [Neem](#) (I buy it locally at [Parivar Spices & Food](#) 1275 Central Ave, Albany, NY). She reported to me her friend had tried the stuff and had amazingly positive results. So I decided to try a tube.

Your mileage may vary but I found the stuff to be amazingly affective at tightening my gums and reducing my tooth sensitivity. I saw the dentist on Monday. He looked at my mouth and asked what I change I'd made. I explained the toothpaste change and he said, "Hmm. Seems I heard something about it before, where can I buy some."

Here is another potential grace story for you to ponder that is unfolding as we speak.

After I got my first Android phone a little over three years ago, I downloaded an app called [Insight Timer](#). All it originally did was play nice bells at the end of a timed meditation period. Then they added a social media feature. You can see who else is meditating at the same time you are. You can see their picture and a little tag line under their picture of up to 50 characters, kind of a meditation tweet. Mine is: "Keep calmly knowing change one breath at a time" You can friend these other meditators and sit with them virtually because you can see who of your friends are meditating at the same time you are. As I sit at the same time each morning from about 5am to 6am, I see many familiar faces. I carry on supportive exchanges with a couple of people in different parts of the world. I love being part of a worldwide meditation community.

The latest version of the app shows a collage of tiny little pictures of the people who have just completed meditation sessions the same time you have who are not currently your friends. At any given time hundreds of people are using the timer app. I like to randomly click on the pictures to discover who these people are. Many of the more experienced meditators are very interesting people. You can list a web site on your profile and these have been fascinating finds too.

I was drawn to one such fellow by his tag line, "Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists." So we exchanged a few messages. I suggested he sounded like a UU. Turns out he is in seminary and a follower of a woman named Regina Dawn Akers. I'd never heard of her so I of course [Googled her](#), [watched a video](#) of her, checked her out on Facebook and friended her. She seems like an interesting religious teacher who has been inspired in her work through a series of moments of grace. She could be a nut or maybe she might be a sincere person who has a teaching for me and my ministry, maybe even a gift for teaching non-duality. We'll see. We are planning to have a chat next week.

So in the toothpaste example and the Insight Timer App example, people I connected with became mediums through which I came across things and people that are actually and potentially helpful to me. I know some who would say that God used those two people as mediums of communicating grace to me.

As a reality based religious professional, it is easy for me to be skeptical that God is communicating with me this way. On the other hand, if I understand grace as a freely given opportunity I can accept or reject, grace is happening all the time.

And being in a wide network of relationships increases my access to grace.

If you use this understanding of grace, being a member of a religious community increases the odds of a graceful moment tremendously.

Over the fifteen plus years [I've served here](#), I've seen this congregation be the agents of grace for a number of people. Whether it is the Caring Network stepping in during a crisis; the Pastoral Care Associates providing empathy; listening and support for someone going through a difficult transition; the Economic Distress Support Network keeping the lights and heat on for someone; to even providing a place to stay in several cases I know of. We're of course not perfect at doing this but there is a lot of support that goes on behind the scenes you'll never know about.

I recently talked to a ministerial colleague who had served in one location for about twenty-five years whose child was in a terrible bicycle accident a few years ago. The boy's face was severely damaged and required extensive and expensive plastic surgery that the insurance company refused to pay. The family was left with 65,000 dollars in medical bills. My colleague talked about being deeply moved that non-members in town came through with 30,000 in donations to help pay that bill. That generosity was completely unexpected and very gratefully received.

When grace really happens though, is when people gather for a memorial service to share the pain of a significant loss. The love that the family of the twenty-one year old young man received at the service on Friday, I know, made a big difference in their grieving process. When saying goodbye to the body of your child for the last time, it makes a big difference to have friends and family around to hold you up. I was honored to be there to help, perhaps by the grace of God.

The truth is, we are not alone. If you are feeling alone, speak with me. I can help you fix that problem. In a community like this one, there are many, many opportunities for connection. And in those connections, grace happens. Not every day, not maybe when you expect it, but it will happen. In my experience the key is paying close attention to the moment, as these opportunities can easily slip by without being noticed. And many of these opportunities are not moments to get something, but moments to give something. For the greatest grace I experience is when I notice the opportunity to give of myself. I almost missed the one to do the service for the family. It took Bobbi Place calling me and saying, pay attention.

May you too, attend carefully to the graceful moments coming your way and receive the gift.

Anne Lamott humbly said it well:

I do not at all understand the mystery of grace -
only that it meets us where we are
but does not leave us where it found us.

May we be attentive to the opportunities grace presents and
have the courage to bring them to life.

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