

Grace

Jamaica Plain, September 9, 2007, Rev. Terry Burke

Today's sermon is on grace. It comes from my sense that this day, this Sunday when we re-gather, this new church year of ours, is a gift of grace. Today, September 9th, is a gift.

I like to look up the spiritual and cultural significance of the dates of our Sunday services. September 9th is the Feast of Joachim and Anna, the parents of Mary, the grandparents of Jesus, according to church tradition. They are often shown embracing in front of their bed, suggesting that their physical union was an important part of their spiritual lives, and that their spiritual deepening had an impact on their child's life.

For my Russian friends, this is the anniversary of the KGB's murder of dissident Russian priest Alexander Menn. During the Soviet era, all religious education or instruction was banned. The Hungarians Unitarians did their instruction during Yoga classes. Alexander Menn reached out beyond the traditional church to teach. He organized evenings at his home where scientists, artists, and other intellectuals shared their questions about faith.

For Catholics, September 9th remembers Peter Claver, a 16th century Jesuit who fought to abolish the African slave trade. In the secular world, it's Grandparents' Day. Is this because Joachim and Anna are Jesus' grandparents? While part of me regards Grandparents' Day as a Hallmark plot, it IS appropriate to remember our spiritual and physical ancestors. Remembering my grandparents Anthony, Anna, Mary and Arthur, I realize how different my life is from theirs. And I give thanks that, because of them, here I am. It is important to remember who we are, and where we come from.

So this particular day brings many gifts of association. In saying that this day is a gift of grace for our community, I realize that I had better define my terms. The first dictionary definitions of grace refer to beauty, "graceful," as in a graceful dancer or baseball catch. Then come usages related to generosity, help, or mercy. Finally, we get to a theological

definition, "Divine love and protection freely given." Grace from the Latin "gratia," favor, which become the Italian "gratia," thanks. Or as I heard people say in Rome 30 years ago, "grats."

So in saying "Grats," "thank you," for the grace of this day, we are remembering and acknowledging a divine gift freely given to all. I don't usually remember that gift. Often I find myself, as I did last week, waiting, waiting to pick up one of my children, and running through a "to do" list. It was summer's end, and I started a mental list of projects that I hadn't finished. A cloud of gloom started to descend upon my heart and soul. Then, drawing upon the wisdom of the 12 Step programs, I switched to gratitude. I listed all of the things that I had actually gotten done this summer. The gloom dispersed when I realized what a long, long list it was.

With schools starting, I was struck by today's reading from Barbara Crafton. Her mother, moved by the story of a town in Iceland that lost all its children to a volcano, always spoke loving words to her children when they left for school. As the parent of teenagers, I know how difficult that can be at times. Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of the mindfulness of realizing that "Your child is there before you, and your arms are available: hugging is possible." Too often we are distracted from the gift around us. A friend told me of his appointment with a Chinese-American doctor. The doctor said, "We are getting older. It is important to focus." Then he looked my friend in the eye and said again, "Focus."

Buddhist teacher Steven Levine writes of his experiences working with the dying. Often they would say to him, "I wish that I had one more year." So Levine attempted to live his life for a year as if it were his last, to live mindfully and without fear. What are we waiting for in order to live our lives? What would you do differently if you knew you only had one precious year to live?

I've been trying to follow Levine's exercise, however imperfectly. This summer I've written 14,000 words on a book. It's easy for me to feel, I wish I'd written more, but it's still 14,000 words more than I had in June. When I was on sabbatical in '01, my trip to

Jerusalem fell through due to political unrest. So I signed up for a two week program in Jerusalem this February. This fall, I'm taking an adult education class on doing stand up comedy. This October, my wife Ellen McGuire and I are actually going away for our 25th wedding anniversary. Of course, we have to decide between us where we're going.

Will my novel ever be published? Who knows? Will I be any good at stand up? Maybe not. Still, trying to live mindfully, as if I only had a year to live, means trying to let go of control. It means being willing to make mistakes. It's aint easy. Letting go of some of my fear and control is based on the understanding that somehow, God, a Higher Power, what the Universalists called "All Conquering Love," is ultimately in control.

Our dog is a good teacher of mindfulness and letting go of control. When I've been away for hours and come home, he makes it clear that 'A dog's gotta do what a dog's gotta do.' He has to take a walk. This takes me away from work and puts me out into the world and its wonders. Walking the dog, I notice changes in nature, and I speak to people on the street.

On Labor Day evening, I was waking the dog in my Roslindale neighborhood when we came upon a party. A balding, heavy set, middle-aged man, wearing a Red Sox "t" shirt and holding a large red plastic cup, stood by the sidewalk. He said to us, "It's a great day." I agreed. "Tomorrow will be a great day too." I said "Yes" to that. "You know, any day you're not under the ground is a good day!" "That's true," I replied. We nodded heads and the dog and I walked on.

Last year, on Labor Day, I had the same conversation with the same man. Is he a Zen saint, a Rozy angel, or does he always say the same thing at parties? Perhaps Someone is trying to remind me to pay attention.

One of Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh's exercises on mindfulness is a meditation on our hands. We are to remember when we use them that our ancestors are present in the lines of our hands. When I was a new minister, I had the congregation meditate on things

they had done with their hands: prepared a meal, washed a child, made music, caressed a lover, patted a purring cat, built a boat, painted a picture, planted flowers....

Our hands are a gift of grace, a gift to be thankful for. When we pray at church meetings, I usually have people hold each other's hands. During the Reconvanting service on the 23rd, we will lay hands on one another, and pray for our shared ministry. Though we sit in box pews on Sunday morning, during our prayer it seems as if we hold each other's hands.

Holding each other's hands, we have the gift of today, and the gift of this year of church life. We have the gift of this year to grow our interior spiritual life and nurture our children, like Joachim and Anna. We can reach out to those with questions about faith, like Alexander Menn. We can know who our spiritual ancestors and grandparents are, and we can act against the social ills of our time like Peter Claver. As Teresa of Avila put it, "Whose hands are God's hands but our hands?"

We give thanks for the gift of these hands, this day, this new year of grace to live together. Now, following long time church practice, we'll do a little pilgrimage of grace, a walking meditation. For those who wish, we will thankfully, silently walk through the parish hall and dining room, going out the side door, up the sidewalk, through the gate, and back in the front door. The children will join us. The walking meditation reminds us that this space is sacred and graceful through our presence... We walk with one another, with our spiritual ancestors, and with those who will follow us... As we walk, imagine and give thanks for this coming year.