

March 8, 2015 Psalm 19  
Grace, Forgiveness, Repentance  
Rev. Joy R. Haertig

Pastor Janet Wolf tells this story about her wildly diverse congregation: “[The church] had people with power and PhDs and folks who have never gone past the third grade; folks with two houses and folks living on the streets, and, as one person who struggles with mental health declared, “those of us who are crazy and those who think they’re not.”

Years ago, a woman named Fayette found her way to the church. Fayette lived with mental illness and lupus and without a home. She joined the new member class. The conversation about baptism, “this holy moment when we are named by God’s grace with such power it won’t come undone”, as the pastor put it – especially grabbed Fayette’s imagination. Pastor Janet tells of how, during the class, Fayette would ask again and again, “*And when I’m baptized, I am...what?*”...and the class learned to respond to Fayette each time she asked: “Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.”

“O yes!” she’d say, and then we could go back to our discussion.

The day of Fayette’s baptism came. Pastor Janet described it:

“Fayette went under, came up sputtering, and cried, ‘And now I am...?’ And we ALL sang, ‘Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.’ ‘O Yes!’ Fayette shouted as she danced all around the fellowship hall.

Two months later Pastor Janet received a phone call.

Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital. So the pastor went in to see her, from a distance she saw her pacing back and forth. When the pastor got to the door, Fayette turned and saw her and said, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and...’ She caught sight of herself in the mirror – hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned askew, she started again, ‘I am beloved, precious child of God, and...’ she looked in the mirror again and declared...’and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful I’ll take your breath away!’ [Janet Wolf’s story is from *The Upper Room Disciplines* 1999 (Nashville: The Upper Room) and I found it on Jan Richardson’s blog at <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2010>]

This morning we continue our Lenten journey using Marcus Borg’s book on restoring Christian words, [Speaking Christian](#). Our words this morning are grace, forgiveness, and repentance.

**I quite purposely put GRACE first in our three words because I believe that Grace is foundational in our relationship to the Web of Life, the Ground of Being that we call “God”.**

Grace is confirmed in the book of Genesis at the beginning of our Bible in the beautiful myth of creation that affirms God’s Spirit moving across the waters of creation and the affirmation that it is ALL GOOD. It is affirmed again in the words from Psalm 19 we heard this morning – “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork”. It is ALL Good –all Beloved by God...

Using Borg’s thesis, I refresh our memory again by saying that traditional Christian language has been dismissed by many of us as too limiting because it has been shaped by **1. The literalization of language in the modern period, and 2. The interpretation of Christian language within a framework which Borg calls “heaven and hell” Christianity.**

In “heaven and hell” Christianity, GRACE comes **after** repentance and forgiveness. Grace in that framework has traditionally been something someone earns by repenting from “sins”, and asking for forgiveness; by confessing to particular statements of belief (Jesus Christ as son of God, crucified for our sins and risen on the third day)...

And in some cases, you may or may not receive that gift of grace from God if you did not repent of particular “sins”.

This understanding of grace usually goes with a punitive image of God.

As an example, Borg remembers conversations in his childhood home about whether suicide was an unforgiveable sin. The logic was that you could not repent if you’re dead because you committed suicide. (Borg, Pg. 153) (I remember hearing this in my younger years as well, not from my own parents, but from others...I thought it was simply nuts!!!)

In the heaven and hell framework, grace, repentance, and forgiveness, **also** have to do with the afterlife and where you will spend it!

I got your attention this morning with the powerful story of Fayette and her Pastor Janet because it embodies so beautifully an alternative understanding of **Grace**.

Grace is **not** something we **earn** through our actions or lose through our actions or experiences.

Grace is not bestowed on us through the Christian ritual of baptism – baptism is simply a symbolic ritual that affirms the innate dignity and worth that is already there.

You are a beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.

*And so is the person sitting next to you.*

*But here comes the tricky part...*

*So is the man on death row.*

*So are the members of ISIS*

*So are Hindus and Muslims and Atheists.*

*The very galaxy that holds our planet spinning in space, is beloved and precious.*

I still remember many years ago when I first read a sermon written by the 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Paul Tillich called "You are Accepted". In his words I came to understand what this rather vague/mysterious, yet common word in our Christian tradition meant.

Tillich described it this way:

*"Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? It does not mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Savior, or that the Bible contains truth. To believe that something is, is almost contrary to the meaning of grace.*

*Furthermore, grace does not mean simply that we are making progress in our moral self-control, in our fight against special faults, and in our relationships to men and to society. Moral progress may be a fruit of grace; but it is not grace itself...[Grace] does not happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life...it strikes us when year after year the longed for perfection of life does not appear...sometimes in those moments a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is **as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything...simply accept the fact that you are accepted."** (The Shaking of the Foundations by Paul Tillich, Chap. 19 [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org))*

Grace is the very warp and weave of Creation itself.

With this understanding of GRACE as our foundation, let us briefly look at the words forgiveness and repentance.

Borg asks the basic question, "Do we need to be forgiven by God?"

His answer: "It depends on what you mean by that."

Do we imagine forgiveness as something God decides to do? That God decides to forgive some people, but not others?

In the heaven and hell framework, we are forgiven only if we earnestly confess our sin, believe in Jesus, and resolve to live differently.

If we begin with the foundation of Grace as I described it, then forgiveness is not really God's issue --- forgiveness is **our** struggle; our journey. (An important one, but nonetheless, ours)

With radical Grace, creation is good and accepted. We do not need to search for God's approval so we can be loved or to get into heaven.

**Grace liberates us from understanding God in this way.**

As Borg writes: "Whose verdict of ourselves are we going to accept? Our own? Our culture's? Our church's? Or God's?"

Grace liberates us from the societal message that tells us we are not good enough.

So why do we have prayers of confession and words of assurance in worship if we are already accepted by God's grace?

Prayers of confession and words of assurance are for **us** – not to appease God.

**Forgiveness is our issue – it is our struggle; our journey and confession is good for the soul.**

We do fall short of the goal of loving God, loving our neighbor as we love our self, and we know it.

We confess, we ask for forgiveness --- we seek to forgive others --- to liberate ourselves from the burden of the past and to start anew.

Did you know that there is a hot, new business that capitalizes on people's needs to fess up? Fee-based phone services and Web sites allow customers to confess anonymously – anything from admissions of petty theft to adultery and even murder.

After the first year of business, one such telephone service, The Confession Line, reportedly made 17 million dollars. Plans were implemented to expand from 25 telephone lines to 100. (Life Support System blog, Steve Goodier, 03 March 2015)

Writer Steve Goodier quotes researcher James Pennebaker, author of *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, who studied the health benefits of confession. Some people's secrets literally make them sick, he writes. He discovered that criminals who confessed to lie detector technicians were often so grateful for the physical relief they felt after "getting it all

out”, that they actually sent birthday, holiday and thank you cards to the polygraph personnel who heard their stories.

(Life Support System blog, Steve Goodier, 03 Mar 2015)

We need safe places, safe people to speak our truth to. I have had people thank me for providing that for them. I have been blessed by having people I could speak my truth to which then enabled me to receive liberation from the burden of guilt and shame I carried, which in-turn opened me to the Grace that was there all along.

Forgiveness is our human journey of opening up to the gift of Grace that is already there. It is most definitely a significant part of our relationships with one another.

And finally, let me briefly consider the word repentance since Forgiveness and Repentance so often go hand-in-hand, and sin is usually in there too – but I am going to talk about that one in two weeks...

Within the heaven and hell framework, repentance means **being thoroughly sorry for our sins and earnestly resolving not to continue the behaviors and thoughts understood to be sins.**

It can also mean that if our repentance does *not* contain enough remorse or resolve, then forgiveness may not be possible.

*(This understanding can pertain to God and to our human relationships as well as we can hold grudges if we feel like someone has not really “repented” enough)*

**The biblical meanings of repentance are quite different and much richer. (Borg)**

Repentance has two primary meanings:

The first is from the *Hebrew* word in the Old Testament commonly translated into English as repent or repentance means “to turn, or return”.

It directly relates to ancient Israel’s experience of exile in Babylon. To repent meant to **return to the homeland...to the land where God is.**

What a powerful metaphor that is:

To repent is to turn to God, or re-turn to God --- **not that ever left**, we are the one’s taking the side trips away from our most humane self!

In the New Testament, the roots of the *Greek word* for repentance means “to go beyond the mind we have” which is “both provocative and evocative”, isn’t it?

The Bible *does* speak of repenting for our sins, but the emphasis is **NOT** so much on contrition and sorrow and guilt, but about turning from them and returning to God. **Repentance is about change – it is about seeing things in a new way.**

The homeless woman, Fayette said to her church community the day she was baptized: “And when I’m baptized, I am...?” And they all sang in answer to her question with pure voices of delight:

“A beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.”

Surely that was a new way of seeing herself – she repented from seeing herself the way our society judged her, and began to see herself as God saw her: beloved and precious and beautiful to behold.

Perhaps we can repent from our understanding of Christian language from the heaven and hell framework and restore these powerful words to our hearing...

Amen and amen.