



Grace

The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our own faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community. We explore each theme in worship and in our newsletter; in covenant groups, guided writing sessions and Wednesday evening programming; and in our community outreach ministries, our literary journal and programs, and many other opportunities. The November theme is Grace.

By Karen Hering

Few words have stirred as much theological debate and division over the centuries while still arriving in the current millennium as untarnished, as frequently and comfortably spoken and as difficult to define.

Depending on who you ask and when, grace might be equated with salvation or with sacraments, with the presence of God, or with beauty or life itself. Grace is resilience. Grace is forgiveness. It is sin's opposite. It is healing. It is revelation, the oneness of all being. It is enlightenment. It is light. It comes before faith. It comes after faith. Some say it is faith.

Mostly, it seems, what we know about grace is that it's largely a matter of not knowing.

One of my favorite confessions of Augustine's is about grace. "What is

grace?" he asked, right away admitting in a nearly palindromic puzzle, "I know until you ask me; when you ask me, I do not know." I concur. When I woke up this morning I knew exactly what to write about grace. It's when I got out of bed and put my fingers to the keyboard that things got a little difficult.

Perhaps this is as it should be. Grace, after all, begins with beyond. Grace shows up in the portal of not knowing.

When the heart is clenched tight, whether in anger or certitude, in fear or in grief, grace coaxes the fist open, looks into the palm and reads there a lifeline of a larger possibility.

Grace is an open hand, extended to the stranger, to the loved one, to the wounded one within. It is the open hand of relationship, of kindness, of blessing.

Grace moves. Grace heals. Grace dances. Grace is the sigh we release on the last note of a song or when the end of the poem becomes clear.

When a room is closed and stuffy, it is grace that opens the window and grace that then blows in.

"Grace fills empty spaces," wrote Simone Weil in her journal. "But it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void."

Grace can knock us off our feet when we stand on the shore looking out. Then it's grace that catches us before we are washed out to sea.

Grace is given, and grace is received. It cannot be stolen, even by the best of thieves.

Grace is an opening. Just when we think we know exactly what's going on, who we are, who everyone else is and what can and cannot happen next, grace draws back the bolt of our knowing, flings wide a new view.

Grace is the guest of humility. Rumi said it plainly but not unkindly:

*You are so weak. Give up to grace.
The ocean takes care of each wave
till it gets to shore.
You need more help than you know.*

Grace never comes to the fully self-sufficient. But then, which of us really are? Grace comes to each of us in turn and to all of us unmerited.

Grace points to the possibility of more. At the end of the sentence, at the bottom of the page, in the heart held wide open, there is always

more.

Grace Resources

BOOKS

Elizabeth and Hazel, by David Margolick, exploring the power and challenges of grace. A compelling account of the complex and still unfolding relationship between Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, and Hazel Bryan, a white student in Little Rock's Central High, whose images in a 1957 news photo came to represent the hatred and pain of that historic integration.

The Grace of Silence, by Michelle Norris, a memoir exploring Norris' own family stories to ask the question, "What's been more corrosive to the dialogue on race in America over the last half century or so – things said or unsaid?"

MOVIES

Babette's Feast, short story by Isak Dinesen and 1987 movie in which a mysterious Frenchwoman prepares a sumptuous feast for a gathering of religious ascetics, introducing them to the true essence of grace.

Amazing Grace, a musical and historical PBS documentary by Bill Moyers about the writing and longstanding influence of the song "Amazing Grace."

Glory, a 1989 feature film about the Civil War's first company of black soldiers serving in the federal army.