

“Grace”

Ezekiel 47:9 & 12, Matthew 11:29, Mark 16:8 & John 7:38

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What do you think about Richard Rohr’s statement? “Too many have named God something other than grace.”

Richard Rohr wrote, “The goodness of God fills all the gaps of the universe, without discrimination or preference. God is the gratuity of absolutely everything. The space in between everything is not space at all but Spirit. God is the “goodness glue” that holds the dark and light of things together, the free energy that carries all death across the Great Divide and transmutes it into Life. When we say that Christ “paid the debt once and for all,” it simply means that God’s job is to make up for all deficiencies in the universe. What else would God do? Basically, grace is God’s first name, and probably last too. Grace is what God does to keep all things God has made in love and alive – forever. Grace is God’s official job description. Grace is not something God gives; grace is who God is. Too many have named God something other than Grace.”

Jesus said, **Matthew 11:29 MSG “Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.”** We have a tendency to force things, to force others to behave like our self, to force others to see the world and God like we do. God is grace. God invites us to join the flow of grace and let grace sweep us away on a journey of healing, reconciliation, and wholeness.

The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of grace being like a river. **Ezekiel 47: 9 & 12 “Life will flourish wherever this water flows. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow along both sides of the river. The leaves of these trees will never turn brown and fall, and there will always be fruit on their branches. There will be a new crop every month, for they are watered by the river flowing from the Temple. The fruit will be for food and the leaves for healing.”**

Jesus said, **John 7:38 “If anyone thirsts, let them come to me and drink. Rivers of living water will brim and spill out of the depths of anyone who believes in me.”**

St. Teresa of Avila used a similar metaphor when she described how you can either keep digging the channel or find the actual spring and let it just flow toward you, in you, and from you. For St. Teresa, grace is about finding that inner flow of the Holy Spirit and not wasting time digging trenches.

Richard Rohr uses a different metaphor, writing, “Most of Christian history has largely put the cart of requirements before the “horsepower” itself, thinking that loads of carts, or “I have the best cart,” will eventually produce the horse. It never does. The horsepower is precisely our experience of primal union with God. You see the horse does all the work. Your work is of another kind: to stay calmly and happily on the road and not get back into the harness.”

We are a church once reformed always reforming, once changed always changing. Hopefully, changing by letting God’s grace flow in us and through us. Not all change is in accordance with God’s grace. We gather as a community to learn the unforced rhythms of grace, to discern what changes are God’s will, to let the current of God’s living water carry us into ever more abundant life.

System research has found over and over again that whenever a person changes there is a strong counter urge to change back. Whenever a family, church, community, country, any group, changes the group wants to change back, to achieve homeostasis. That is why even good grace-filled change is really hard. Every time the church has gone through a reformation, the church struggled with counter reformation. System research has found that often a person or group does not realize that a change is affecting them, it often happens at the sub-conscious level. People who for years loved each other, served together in love, celebrated with each other, and for each other become uncomfortable with one another.

We are in a season of worldwide, rapid change. This church is going through tremendous change. Since I joined you in serving God here, I have had the honor of celebrating 79 resurrections to Life Triumphant.

Certainly we are joyful for our loved ones who are enjoying heaven; yet we grieve, for until we go home to heaven we are incomplete without the love of their physical presence. Our church demographics are changing, we are older and more diverse. In the last eleven years, every staff person has changed except Karen, Carla, and I. Two of which served for decades. Ministries and programs have changed. Instead of providing space for a Preschool, we lease space to a Latino family of faith. Every year at least a third of session changes. We have strived to not change 9:15am worship. We have added a second unique worship service. The mix of the missions we support is constantly evolving. This church has always been changing, but perhaps it is changing faster and in more ways more than ever before. The sabbatical changed me. It changed you. It changed North Presbyterian Church. Whether these changes are grace-filled or not, in many cases has yet to be seen. It depends on how we respond, how we counter reform. Since we are a community, this means each person's response has an impact on everyone else. Can we name our fears, our frustrations, owning them as our own, without blaming others or our self? Can we truly listen to each other? Can we identify the hurts and needs of each other and respond with compassionate love? Can we recognize the passion in each other to serve God, even when they do things differently than we want them to be done? Can we go deeper than merely pointing out an issue to identifying a mutual solution? Can we live in hope instead of cynicism? Can we share our feelings using I statements instead of transferring our perspective onto another with you statements? Can we avoid name calling, focusing on the issue, because we see each other as a beautiful, precious, beloved child of God? Can we realize each person is a broken, imperfect person and each person has a piece of the solution? Can we speak the truth in love, that builds each other up more and more into the likeness of Jesus? Can we focus more on celebrating the abundance of blessings God has given us, that we share and the numerous ways we are blessing the world than the ways we need to improve? Can we be forgiving and gracious to each other? Can we let go of the past, live in the present, and plan how we will join the ever-changing flow of grace together, that is changing our future?

Richard Rohr wrote, "In the first aborted ending to Mark's Gospel—the oldest gospel—the text ends on a very disappointing and thus likely truthful note: **Mark 16:8** "They ran away from the tomb frightened out of their wits. They said nothing to a soul, for they were afraid." What a strange response after having just talked to an angel who told them not to be afraid!" We are still running from resurrection. We are still choosing fear over grace. Those first believers argued and fought with each other over what to do and how to do it. Saul was literally killing Christians then by grace he changed and became Paul nurturing Christians. Peter and Paul, and the followers of each, were in a power struggle, arguing, over food purity practices, traditions, circumcision, the Lord's Supper, Baptism, and how to be a faith community of Jews and Greeks, slaves and free. Arguing over how to honor their diversity and unite in loving community. Some thought the apostles should teach and provide pastoral care, others thought the apostles should focus on teaching. They decided to ordain deacons to provide pastoral care, so the apostles could focus on teaching.

Richard Rohr writes, "Whether human beings admit it or not, we are in love with—even addicted to—the status quo and the past, even when it is killing us. Resurrection offers us a future—dare I say a permanent future—but one that is unknown and thus scary. Humans find it easier to gather their energy around death, pain and problems than around joy." Richard says, "I know I do. For some sad reason, it is joy that we hold lightly and victimhood that we grab onto."

Sadly, this is true for me. Nine great things can happen to me in a day, and yet I dwell on the one negative. Nine people can compliment me, yet I become grumpy over the one compliant. Instead of hearing the need behind the complaint and responding in love I am selfish, wallowing in my personal hurt which hampers my ability to find a mutual solution sending me into a downward spiral. Hopefully that is merely a personal confession, that I am the only person here that ever does that. It makes me painfully sad to see so many people hurt by each other at church.

Richard Rohr writes, "We have spent centuries of philosophy trying to solve "the problem of evil," yet I believe the much more confounding and astounding issue is "the problem of good." How do we account for so much grace and sheer goodness in this world?"

One change I am trying to make since the sabbatical is whenever I read something negative, I follow it by reading something positive. I find this hard with politics today, but I am trying after I learn something negative about a presidential candidate to find something good about them. I name the crummy parts of my day, then I strive to always end on a positive aspect.

Richard Rohr wrote, "Jesus' Resurrection was an absolute refusal to identify with victimhood or create any victims in retaliation."

After some time, what caused Mark to write the longer ending to his gospel? Was it experiences of God's grace in the midst of the turmoil? Even Mark's second ending is still filled with fear, unbelief, doubt, and grieving yet the disciples shared the good news. The Holy Spirit helped them live in the current of God's grace.

The other gospels written much later fast forward to the changes created by God's grace. There is running, excitement, companionship, joy, eating, catching a huge harvest, rejoicing together, and jumping naked and free into a lake. This is grace, freedom for the future because the past is over, gone, and totally forgiven. This is living into the grace of abundant life and resurrection.

Does proclaiming the Good News mean living in grace by being gracious to our self, each other, and everyone? Is living in grace diving into the current of living water, that every moment is changing and changing us, changing this church, changing the world and changing everything into glorious resurrection. Does that current of grace propel us to jump up from places of fear, hurt, grief, brokenness and discord, to jump up and run to love, healing, rejoicing, wholeness and harmony with everyone?

Have we named God something other than grace? Amen