

The Mutuality of Grace

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Texts: Hebrews 4: 12-16

Please, will you pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Friends, I don't know about you, but when I hear that passage from the letter to the Hebrews, I get nervous! It's intense. A two-edged sword that can pierce me until it divides my soul from my spirit?! God able to judge the thoughts and intentions of my heart because I am naked and laid bare before God – yikes! God, who, by the way, is described as the “one to whom we must render an account.” Anyone else get vibes of “oh man, I'm in trouble?” from this passage? Anyone?

I am right there with you. But I chose it for us this week because I think it has something important to say about grace – namely, that grace saves us from the self-absorption of shame and lovingly demands that we turn, over and over again, towards discipleship.

As intimidating as this passage is, it's also full of love – God sees all of us, every bit of us – the parts we are ashamed of, the parts we are proud of, the parts we want to hide, the parts we accentuate to look good to God or to each other. And God still loves us – in spite of and maybe because of our complicated humanness, our faults, our imperfections. God's love for us frees us from the pressure to look good or to be pure of heart – and maybe it even frees us of some of the shame we carry about not being good enough. This is grace.

But as I sat with this passage, I started to wonder – grace frees us up to do what?

That question led me to a story, a story which feels fitting for this Indigenous People's Day service. It is a story about reckoning with the pain of our church history, and so I want to be clear here at the top – Indigenous People's Day is a day that contains multitudes. It is a day of celebration! Today is a day when we lift up indigenous peoples all over the world, when we honor their resilience in the face of forces of colonization and attempted genocide, when we remember that indigenous lifeways hold vital wisdom and practices for us in coming back into balance with the Earth, with each other, and with our Creator. Today's a day when we give thanks for the ways that indigenous land projects and land stewardship are blossoming all over the country. It's a day when we celebrate that indigenous people are

still here, and when we remember and imagine and love the lives of every young person, every elder, every overburdened parent or artistic auntie or spiritual leader or trickster type who cared for these lands, lived alongside these lands, stewarded these lands, before us.

And it's also a day when we turn toward our history – our history as a church, as a nation, with the particular legacies each of our ancestry carries – with grief, with reckoning, with eyes wide open, with silent vigil and with voices raised. And that is what this story is about.

A couple of years ago, I was part of a ragtag group of people who spent the week, around this time of year as the leaves were changing, walking in pilgrimage across all different parts of eastern Massachusetts to remember and grieve the history of colonization on these lands and to build deeper relationships with each other. We were indigenous people and settlers, young and old, Christian and Buddhist and agnostic, seasoned walkers and those with impractical shoes. We were led by three incredible octogenarian monks from the New England Peace Pagoda, who wore their characteristic bright yellow Buddhist monk robes, drove from site to site in their beat-up

Toyota Camry, and brought their drums with them. Their ministry over the last many decades has been to lead these peace walks all over the world – the largest one took many months and traced the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade down the coast of North America, to the Caribbean and Brazil, and then over to the West coast of Africa. These monks are absolute forces of nature, deeply devoted to telling the truth, willing to sleep anywhere on their journeys, full of humor, and seemingly undaunted by their aging bodies.

We went all over the state of Massachusetts together, this motley crew – to a roundhouse in Mashpee, where we had the honor of participating in a Mashpee Wampanoag sacred ceremony... to Ipswich, where we visited a wide-branched memorial tree strung with yarn and keepsakes and charms and pictures, that marked the site of massacre of an indigenous town during King Phillip's War, the town square in Plymouth where the head of Metacomet, the Wampanoag sachem who had led the Native coalition in King Phillip's War, was displayed for weeks on end.

In each place we held vigil, we mostly chanted. Led by the monks and their drums, we chanted a line from the Lotus Sutra – namu myoho renge kyo, which the monks told us meant, to them, seeing the Buddha nature in all things. At sites of grave harm and mourning, the chant felt like an honoring of the lives of the indigenous people who had been murdered, a funerary chant almost. And it felt like a prayer for us there, too, that we might find the Buddha nature within us and around us, the divine love and stillness at the heart of all things.

Late one afternoon, getting ready to wrap up for the day, we found ourselves in a graveyard in Duxbury. The center of this graveyard is the grave of Myles Standish, an original Puritan settler of those lands who was famous for his brutality and for his pre-emptive strikes on Native people. His grave is on a raised cement platform, ringed by black iron fencing, with four cannons pointed outward guarding each corner.

It was as if he feared that in death the violence that he had wrought would come back to be visited upon him. It broke my heart, to see a gravesite that militarized, and I wondered what Standish and those who designed his grave felt they needed to protect inside those iron gates.

The monks walked over to the grave with their drums, and proceeded to chant – namu myoho rengo kyo. Na mo myoho rengo kyo. The same chant that they had chanted at the graves of indigenous leaders who had been slaughtered in King Phillip’s war. The same chant that they had chanted at some of the ancient indigenous village sites we had visited. Na mo myoho rengo kyo, calling out to the Buddha nature in all things, calling out to the Buddha nature even in Myles Standish’s hyper-militarized grave. They kept going for over half an hour, chanting around his grave.

Now, the monks from the New England Peace Pagoda aren’t Christian, but I understood a bit more about God’s grace that day. Even in the face of one of the early colonizers of this land, whose violence had taken untold numbers of lives, whose attacks had left lasting scars on families and communities – namu myoho rengo kyo. Na mo myoho rengo kyo. “And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account... Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

But – grace to free us to do what? Grace to help us do what? What does that kind of grace ask of us in return?

One of my favorite thinkers about those questions is a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I know we’ve got some theologians and historians in the room – give me a wave if you’ve ever heard of this guy. Awesome. And if you’ve never heard of him, it is my delight to introduce him to you. He’s a Divinity School staple – so much so that one of my professors named their dog Bonhoeffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian who was raised in Germany and was studying in the US when the Nazis came to power. As he watched the fascism rise in his home country, his faith called him to return and be part of the resistance in any way he could. He ended up being imprisoned and later executed for being part of the plot to assassinate Hitler.

Bonhoeffer was committed to living in the world as it is – not in the world of the Garden of Eden, where our actions can be pure good – but in the MESSY world that came after the Garden, where dictators rise and take the lives of tens of millions of people and where we, as Christians, need to decide how to live in THAT world. Now, by no means am I advocating political violence, but Bonhoeffer’s life and theology asks us to get serious about what it means to be a disciple of Christ in this messy world.

Bonhoeffer also thought a lot about GRACE, and so when I read this passage from Hebrews, I immediately thought of him. He wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship* in 1937, a few years before he would return to Germany, convinced that the call of his Christian discipleship demanded that he participate in the resistance to Hitler.

In that book, he distinguishes between two types of grace.

The first type he calls “cheap grace.” This is the type of grace that was meted out from those early colonial pulpits, and later from pulpits all over the land to the enslavers sitting in the pews – grace that forgives the deepest sins while ALSO comfortably maintaining the status quo. Grace that says – God sees all of you, even the most evil parts, and loves and forgives you, so nothing need change.

Bonhoeffer wrote of cheap grace: “[cheap] grace alone does everything, and so everything can remain as it was before... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, Communion without confession, grace without discipleship, grace without the cross. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow upon ourselves.” In other words, cheap grace requires no collaboration from us, no taking stock, no mutuality. Cheap grace is the grace of the Declaration of Forgiveness in our service without the stock-taking and repentance of confession, without the desire or commitment to doing differently.

Bonhoeffer draws a contrast between this and what he calls “costly grace,” which he describes as “the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.” He says, “it is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.” In other words, grace of this kind still comes to us no matter the depth of our sin, no matter the thickness or isolation of our shame, because, as Bryan Stevenson says, each of us is so much more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. But it comes to us when we are on our knees, recognizing our need for it, willing to turn our lives over to Jesus, repenting of the actions we have taken that have distanced us from God and from each other, willing to transform our lives for the sake of discipleship.

This is collaborative grace, a grace of mutuality, and it is where the medicine of grace becomes transformative.

And it is NOT CHILL, you guys! It requires that we take seriously what Jesus asked of his disciples: to make serious, life altering sacrifices for the sake of their discipleship, for the sake of being part of bringing God's kingdom on Earth.

Our church, the United Church of Christ, descends directly from those early Puritan settlers of whom Myles Standish was a part. It's evolved, of course, but the legacy is ours to take responsibility for. We all have different ancestral relationships with that legacy. My very own ancestor, John Alden, is buried a few hundred feet away from Standish in that graveyard, and was his close collaborator. Others of us here are descended from people that those church ancestors enslaved or oppressed, or maybe your ancestors arrived on these soils 50 years ago or 5 years ago, and this history feels distant from your family's story.

Wherever we find ourselves woven into this story, it is our history to reckon with, together, as part of this today-church. It is not our fault but it is our solemn and joyful responsibility.

So what does this passage from the letter to the Hebrews have to say to us, in these pews, today? When I read that passage from the letter to the Hebrews and I hear the last line, "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" – this is what I hear.

Grace is "namu myoho rengo kyo" – the Buddha nature is in all things, and God loves you no matter what.

We can approach that throne of grace with boldness because God already knows every bit of us – the parts we are proud of, the parts we try to hide, the hurt parts, the parts that are capable of the kind of evil Myles Standish enacted. God already knows it all.

We approach that throne of grace with boldness and also with humility – on our knees, full of confession, wanting to repent, which means to turn and turn again, willing to give up our lives for discipleship.

I don't know what that means for each of you. I don't know yet what it means for me. But it's a question that is worthy of guiding our lives. It is a terrifying and exhilarating invitation, one that dares to turn the world upside down in the way that true, costly grace does – it cannot stay the same. And for a church that grew out of the Pilgrims' theology, for a church that was originally planted in this soil as a colonizing force, what does that costly grace mean?

Myles Standish is not alive now to repent, to fall to his knees in front of God, leveled and willing to be transformed by God's grace. So what does it mean for us as a church to pick up that solemn and joyful responsibility of repentance in mutuality with God's deep well of grace for us? Perhaps it means risking everything to speak out against the forces of violence, silence, erasure, and colonization here in our backyard, in Palestine, in Ukraine, around the world.

Perhaps it means relinquishing our wealth to the landback projects that are flourishing all over the country with indigenous stewardship. Perhaps it means building relationships with our Massachusetts and Wampanoag and Nipmuc neighbors so that we can be with them in a different way than our church forebears were. Maybe it means acknowledging that we don't know, and falling to our knees in willingness to be transformed by God's grace into disciples of Christ in this messy, heartbreaking, beautiful world that contains all kinds of violence, all kinds of grace, and all kinds of resilience.

On this Indigenous People's Day and every day, may we approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need, and so that we may give our lives over to discipleship.

Amen.

