

A SYMPHONY CALLED GRACE

**a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
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A few years ago, a teenager named Tonya in my church in Oakland was diagnosed with a particularly dangerous form of leukemia that often led to death by internal bleeding. The church held candlelight vigils and special prayer services. Congregants brought forth an outpouring of caring support for her family. Her doctors eventually achieved a cure, thanks to cutting-edge anti-cancer medicines based on therapeutic use of Vitamin A, of all things. It was like an unexpected gift reversing something terrible.

Around the time of Tonya's recovery, I came across another dramatic example of such an unexpected gift. Two friends of mine, senior members of my home congregation in Oakland, showed up for my first guest preaching assignment at a nearby church -- for moral support. They didn't drive, so they called on another senior congregant to bring them.

We went to lunch together afterward. My friends shared some remarkable life experiences. And then their driver friend, Maria, told her story.

She spoke softly, with a German accent. Maria was born in Vienna in 1925, to Jewish parents. She took ballet lessons at the Vienna Opera House. Occasionally the opera company assembled some little girls to be angels in the performances. Maria recalled how they put blond wigs on the children to make them look more "angelic."

In 1938 the Nazis marched into Austria. That November, they carried out the attacks known as "Krystalnacht" -- the night of broken glass, when mobs smashed the windows of Jewish businesses, synagogues, and homes. Ninety Jewish men and boys were killed. The Nazis took Maria's grandmother and seven-year-old cousin Lisa to the death camp at Dachau. She never saw them again.

A Quaker group organized a program called the Kindertransport, to save Jewish children from the Nazis. Maria and her brother George had a chance to be evacuated to England. They left Vienna by train in the middle of the night. Later Maria's family was forced to flee, eventually making their way to New York.

When the Kindertransport reached England, Maria realized she and George were being sent to different cities. She cried out to him not to leave her, but nothing could be done. She recalled this parting as the hardest, loneliest moment of her life.

After the war, Maria joined her family in America. She got a job, got married, and started a family. Her son Paul began playing the trumpet at the age of nine. His father, a doctor, considered this interest frivolous, but Maria encouraged it.

Paul grew up to be a professional musician creating music that combined jazz and the Jewish music known as “klezmer.” His life brought Maria’s story full circle. His fascination with klezmer jazz took him to Berlin. He became active in the renaissance of Jewish culture that has been unfolding in Germany in recent years.

Maria’s story seemed a lot like Tonya’s – the kind that made people shake their heads and say, “but for the grace of God” It’s a common enough expression, but what does it really mean? Is grace just a dressed up synonym for good luck – a way of saying that after drawing some very bad cards in life, Tonya and Maria turned over some very good ones?

Religious leaders often talk about grace being an experience of life as a God-given gift. It’s obvious, though, that there is much suffering, catastrophe, and evil in the world. If there is something that makes life as a whole -- including the bad parts -- a gift, then that goodness must come from some domain other than the material one. I say, it comes from connection with that creative life force sometimes called God, or the divine, which we have often talked about here. We sense this connection through a kind of an inner knowing that is deeper than thinking and feeling – a knowing that can be cultivated by spiritual practice. But sensing the presence of that force, how can we know it is good? We know it is good because when we are connected with it, we feel that goodness running through us. We leave behind that feeling of needing to labor to be good. Instead, good is the place we come from, rather than try to get to.

Right down to the present day, there has been a steady stream of religious thinking and writing that asks, “if God is good, how could God have created a world so beset by suffering and evil?” How can we reconcile claims of the goodness of God with the Holocaust? When we ask this, we are standing in one of the great religious questions of all time.

Here is my attempt to answer that question. I believe the given world is good -- notwithstanding the bad or evil parts -- in the sense that the world and everything in it represent potential for doing good. The nonhuman parts of it are innocent – incapable of conceiving of good and evil and choosing between them. Humans, with their spark of the divine, are the actualizers of that potential.

The potential for good and capacity for choice necessarily imply a potential for evil. Human beings can actualize that potential too. This happens when we live in disconnection from the divine – a condition in which we are wounded, our hearts close, and our souls shrink. A condition that we express into our world as addiction, violence, and loveless relating that uses other humans as if they were objects – among other ills.

So the question whether the world is good, and thus whether God is good, comes down to whether choice is good. I say that a choiceful world is good, and a choiceless one would be bad. I believe choice is how we affirm and strengthen our connection to the divine; and affirming and strengthening our connection to the divine is how we enlarge our capacity for choosing and creating good in our world. We move back and forth between connection with the infinite and translation of potential good into actual good in the finite world.

Grace is this potential -- embedded in the world we are given -- for the expression of divine goodness in the infinite variety of human living. This expression is what I would call living a graceful life, rather than a merely happy or successful life. It represents a receptiveness to cooperative possibilities, an attitude toward living as more of a dance and less of a duel.

The potential for something like the Holocaust is part and parcel of being given a world of choice and the opportunity for a graceful life. It is an extraordinary cost, beyond meaningful description; but when I consult my inner knowing, I can't conclude that a choiceless world would be better.

A pastoral acknowledgement is called for here. Some people who have had direct experiences of the Holocaust have said to me, "I don't have any interest in talking about God any more. Any possible relevance of that was extinguished for me by the Holocaust." It is difficult for me to imagine greater sadness than this. If I were to say to such a person what I am saying in this sermon, and afterward she still felt the same way, I could hardly blame her. But I also could not let go of my faith that even a holocaust cannot extinguish the divine spark within human beings. It is there, I insist, waiting for the breath of spirit to be let in again, that it might glow and maybe even burst into flame .

I've been talking about grace mostly in spiritual terms, but how does this connect up with the world "out there" -- the secular, material, physical one where we dwell? What does it mean to talk about a graceful life as one that expresses divine goodness into human living? The real question lurking beneath the surface of that question is "does my life make a difference, and is that difference good?" When we ask this, we are standing in one of the great religious questions of all time. . . . Now I know some of you are thinking, that makes two of the greatest religious questions of all time that we're taking on in the same service. At least one of you is probably thinking, "we should have a bylaw . . . a bylaw that says, 'in any one service the minister shall not address more than one of the great religious questions of all time.' [pause] And further says, no getting around it by using compound questions." And maybe even says "This means you, Preston."

I will make a sincere effort to ration the great religious questions, but I can't let you go home today without finding out whether your lives matter. And I don't mean "matter" just to yourself and your family and friends, or just during your brief lifetime. I mean "matter" ultimately and universally, in a way that transcends time and space.

"Graceful living" isn't some glitzspeak borrowed from a glossy real estate brochure. It means having the experience of being not only a recipient but also an instrument of grace. The place in which we find ourselves when our connection to the divine is present for us is a good place. We know that with an inner knowing. When we come from a place of profound goodness in our actions in the world, the inevitable result is to imbue the world -- or the corner of it in which we live -- with that goodness.

Every time we do this, the outer world gets a little bit gooder. Every time we do this, we matter, and the difference we make is for good rather than ill. And since we ourselves are part of that world, this gooderizing effect is felt in our inner life as well.

The outer world is where we experience both joy from doing good and wounding that can lead us to turn away from living gracefully, away from connection with the divine. Even if our acting from grace does not yield the instant gratification of immediate tangible results, I say that when we do this, our outer world is moved inevitably in a good direction. Often the results will be imperfect, but I say they will be good. You cannot come from a place of spiritual goodness and express evil into the world.

This is so different from viewing life as luck, a fateful hand dealt in a game of cards. Whether you are sleepwalking through life or living gracefully, your life matters, because you're likely to wind up as either a wound or a blessing to other people.

The present condition of the world can be looked at as the net sum of all these matterings over many centuries. Every time a member of our spiritually grounded Environmental Stewardship Group sells one more eco-friendly tote bag, she is moved toward an inner goodness by coming from a place of goodness – that facet of the divine called wholeness with nature. And the world is moved one more inch toward a corresponding outer goodness.

That good inch matters just as much as all the bad inches that have brought us to the brink of environmental disaster. And the matterings we have yet to commit in our lives are why we should do something as uncomfortable as hauling off across the desert, twiddling the dials on our shortwave radios to scan for the music of the spheres, searching for a place of profound connection with the divine, taking a difficult journey toward wholeness.

What that desert caravan might look like is a much longer conversation. Some of you found the first instalments of it troubling. That's not surprising, but let me reassure you a little bit.

We will make lots of unscheduled stops – every time someone says, "I'm interested in what you're doing here." We will tell that seeker what we're doing and invite him to join us. We will offer to catch him up on whatever we think we have learned on our journey. All will be welcomed. No one will be excluded, other than by the self-exclusion of trying out what we're doing, concluding it is not the right caravan for him, and saying goodbye. To which we will respond with our blessing and hope that he may find what's right for him.

That music of the spheres for which we strain our ears and twiddle our radio knobs is waiting to be heard. There is a symphony playing everywhere in the universe, all the time. Every human being, along with everything else, is playing in it. The everything elses – trees, rocks, all of nature -- always play in tune. With the section of this orchestra called humanity, though, it's different. Each of us can sit in the orchestra playing by himself with earmuffs on, listening only to what's playing in his own head, and expressing dissonance into the world. Or we can open our ears and hear the symphony. We can hear it so thoroughly that it becomes wonderfully unclear whether we are playing the symphony or, instead, the symphony is playing us.

The title of this symphony is grace. It is a symphony for which there is no sheet music, a symphony that fades in and out of our hearing -- not because the music is inconstant, but rather because our hearing is. When we tune in to it, we are transformed, ennobled.

When we act in concert, so to speak, the symphony is also transformed. And because the symphony called grace is God made real in the world, God too is transformed by our playing. As the radical theologian Dorothee Soelle has stated, "At best, what Protestant theology and preaching articulate . . . can be summed up as follows. God loves, protects, renews, and saves us. One rarely hears that this process can be truly experienced only when such love, like every genuine love, is mutual. That humans love, protect, renew, and save God sounds to most people like megalomania or even madness. But the madness of this love is exactly what mystics live on."

The Quakers who created the Kindertransport acted in this way. There was no material evidence of an impending gift of grace. The Nazi wolf was at the door. The government of the United Kingdom was resistant. A bill to evacuate Jewish children to the United States died in the U.S. Congress. The Quakers knew they could only save a small fraction of the Jewish children in Europe. They listened for the music anyway, sensed the chance to be instruments of grace.

Tonya's recovery from leukemia resulted from the same kind of graceful living. To see that, we have to pick up one remaining loose thread in Maria's story -- what happened to her brother George, from whom she was separated when the Kindertransport reached England.

Even though his papers had "victim of Nazi persecution" stamped on them, George wound up in an internment camp with other Germans, including a Nobel prize-winning chemist. Another detainee proposed starting a school in the camp.

The chemist began to lecture. George attended and learned a lot of chemistry. He eventually got advanced degrees in biochemistry at Oxford, came to America, and became a professor at M.I.T. George became one the world's leading researchers in a fascinating specialty area: . . . the therapeutic uses of Vitamin A to treat diseases, of all things.

His teachers appreciated that their lives mattered far beyond their capacity to know exactly how. The chance to act gracefully was all the motivation they needed.

Graceful living doesn't have to be as spectacular as life-saving medical research, or a rescue mission like the Kindertransport. It could be as quiet as finding value in a profoundly sad history by capturing its essence in poetry -- as Maria's son Paul, the trumpet player did in this poetic tribute to his great-grandmother:

To My Great-grandmother, Helene Shoenberger (1874-1943)

A fragment of history has settled
in my mind like the last snowflake
of winter resting on the windowsill,
a sole survivor from the passing March

blizzard. As I have not seen the forming
of this ice crystal in the clouds collecting
like armies above my head, I have not
witnessed the making of this memory; but I have known
it by the weight of my mother's voice,
by winter bringing to mind our history.

Steel-strong ice holding down this world
reminds me of a time much colder.
When millions of people and one
I barely knew were hauled up out of cellars,
dragged from dark closets, and taken
from their homes to Auschwitz or Treblinka.

I never met you but have not forgotten
who you are: Viennese born and bred like my mother
only more Hungarian in your gray
peasant dress, stubbornly faithful
to a farm you refused to leave when
the blue-eyed obedient soldiers came through,
willing to sacrifice anything
for their country, even you.

Today we don't need the security
of a trap door that blends
with the floorboards, tightly closed
and strong enough to hold a soldier's
foot. My eyes, tiring from trying
to see the tiny pattern of this yet
unmelted snowflake, can almost see you,
put together from stories and pictures,
dark-skinned and motherly
in your small point in history.

Would you have heeded the warnings
to leave given another chance?
Hidden better? Would you have followed
your granddaughter, my mother, to America?
If you did survive, we still might never
have met. [pause] But it is the job of the living
to know the dead, regardless of the distance.

The stories I have told you today involved suffering and loss, but did have positive
outcomes. But what if Tonya had died? What if Maria and George never made it out of Vienna?
The graceful dances danced by the Quakers and the camp schoolteachers would have been no
less noble, worthy, and important for the world.

How many graceful stories are sitting here in this sanctuary this morning, waiting to be told?

Grace is waiting for us all the time. Each of us gets to choose whether to acknowledge the gift -- whether to hear the symphony and play as part of it instead of on his own. Living gracefully is a godly posture under any circumstances. To live this way in times of extreme adversity simply makes the godliness more palpable. This is the answer grace provides to that fundamental question, does my life make a difference, and is that difference good. To be given a symphony, and then to choose to play your instrument in it – transforming forever yourself, the symphony, and even the God that gave you the symphony in the first place – that makes a goodly and godly difference that can never be erased. If the word weren't so misused and misunderstood, you could call it immortality.

AMEN.