



Grace

Greenville UU Fellowship - Greenville, South Carolina

Covenant Group Session Plan

Session written by Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Cookeville, TN. September 2020

Welcome, Chalice Lighting: *Tonight, as we light our chalice, may it illuminate the compassion in our hearts, the tenderness we carry with us, and the strength in our vulnerability.*

Personal Check In: Briefly share something from your life since we last met and how you are feeling now.

Opening Words:

No summer ever came back, and no two summers ever were alike. Times change, and people change; and if our hearts do not change as readily, so much the worse for us.

~ Nathaniel Hawthorne

Questions to prompt and guide discussion:

1. How do you define grace? Or how have you defined it in the past?
2. Have you ever experienced Weinman's "creative interchange"? In other words, have you ever witnessed a mundane task becoming a spiritual experience when given new meaning? Please share your experience.
3. What is your interpretation of "God"? And how does that influence your interpretation of "grace"?
4. How does grace present itself in your day-to-day?

Reading

"Grace to the Rescue", by Myriam Renaud. Read the article at this link, or below.

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/grace-rescue>

Sharing - This is a time to speak without interruption and for deep listening. Deep listening means no interrupting, no fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight.

Open Discussion - This is a time to respond to something another person said about the topic or to relate additional thoughts that may have occurred as others shared their thoughts on this topic. Continue to practice deep listening.

Closing reading:

The sacred is present and available to us wherever we look or are willing to find it. If we remain open and expectant - watching out of the corners of our eyes, keeping our ears cocked, putting away all preconceived ideas - our lives will emanate the sacred.

~ Abhi Prakash Janamanchi

Announcements/Plans

Check out: As we close today, how are you feeling now?

Extinguish the Chalice

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Grace to the rescue. Unitarian Universalist ideas about what saves us.

By MYRIAM RENAUD | 9/26/2011 | FALL 2011

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.” John Newton, the eighteenth-century Englishman who wrote the famous hymn, had been a slave trader before he became a prominent abolitionist. He said his change of heart, which turned his life around, was grace’s doing. It rescued him; “it saved a wretch like me.”

Grace is often understood to mean the gift of an unexpected rescue. It’s the buoy that appears at our side when we’re about to drown. But from what hazards do we, twenty-first-century Americans, need rescue? What is wretched about our lives? How about physical and emotional suffering, loss of meaning, existential despair? The list could go on.

Given our ever-present need for rescue, the liberal theologian Henry Nelson Wieman (1884–1975), whose theology came to depend little on God, kept room for grace. In *The Source of Human Good* (1946), Wieman, who became a Unitarian in 1949, worried that we humans plunge into despair when we fail to live up to our ideals. And we do invariably fail. According to Wieman, however, a creative power or process (God) can transform us into beings capable of doing good. This process, which he called “creative interchange,” is at work whenever individuals or institutions communicate in ways that foster new meanings. As we integrate these new meanings, our sense of the world’s richness expands and our sense of community strengthens. That, for Wieman, is grace.

Luckily for us, Unitarian Universalist congregational life makes a perfect seedbed for creative interchange. Perhaps you’ve experienced a committee or congregational meeting where a conversation that began as “blah blah blah”, skimming the surface of things, suddenly turned deep. Connections between those present grew palpable, sincere, and cooperative. Reason and feeling operated as one. At first, you had no idea how your congregation could find money for that new religious education space, but something shifted and you found a way. Or you worried that your committee could never agree on a new minister, but something shifted and you reached a consensus. In those shifts, Wieman insisted, creative interchange came to the rescue, helping your group get unstuck so you could honor your ideals and serve the creative good.

Over time, Wieman located this process more and more in the natural order. While some, like novelist Flannery O’Connor, wondered whether he “had strained the soup too thin,” Wieman’s work influenced later UU theologians like Jerome Stone, who teaches today at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago. In *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence: A Naturalist Philosophy of Religion* (1992), Stone judges the notion of God to be scientifically obsolete and, straining the soup still thinner, gives Wieman’s already irrelevant God the coup de grâce. Nonetheless, Stone retains grace. For him, grace is the awe we experience when sunlight turns the edges of clouds into pure shimmer, or a full moon is perfectly reflected in a rain puddle. These are grace-like moments, but they are nature’s gifts, not a deity’s. When life’s troubles threaten to drown us, glimpses of beauty, Stone maintains, can keep us afloat.

Ethicist and theologian James Luther Adams (1901–1994) was also influenced by Wieman but, unlike Wieman and Stone, refused to strain the soup. Adams insisted on the reality of a God beyond the natural order whose creative power sustains meaning and goodness. This creative power finds its “richest focus” when groups of people work together to serve the divine reality by securing freedom, peace, and social justice. He believed that God commands and transforms us with “a love that ‘cares’ for the fullest personal good of all.” But God’s love makes demands and it convicts us when we ignore those demands. Rescued by God, we must act together to rescue others. Touched by grace, we are to re-create grace.

When you get stuck—in self-destructive habits, unjust systems, or simply the daily grind—may grace set you free, whatever your theology.