

Amazing Grace

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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I was born a dancer. Always moving, always seeking a graceful sweep of the arm or a beautiful step. When I began to walk, I began to dance, in increasingly inappropriate places. Like the aisles of the grocery store. Or the outfield during t-ball games, no matter what was happening on the rest of the field.

When I did gymnastics during elementary school, the only part I was any good at was the dancing part. And when I discovered ballet at the age of 13, I knew its disciplined grace was one of the ways my body was made to move.

This wasn't my first encounter with ballet, though. As a kindergartner, I had *flunked out* of my beginning ballet class because of my rambunctiousness. And even as I grew out of rambunctiousness, I never quite grew out of flailing a bit. When I wasn't dancing, I was... not... the picture of grace.

My third grade teacher told my mother at a parent teacher conference that I was so clumsy I could trip over the flowers in the carpet. I was constantly bumping into things and covering my pale skin with bruises.

And in the fifth grade at a class party at the skating rink, *I* was the only kid in the entire place to find the tiny chink in the parquet floor, catch it with my skate, and go sprawling into the wall, breaking my ankle in the process.

I was on crutches for six weeks after that incident, and I loved every minute of it. I had never felt more graceful, swinging around on those crutches like a monkey leaping through the trees.

And so I was, crutches and all... Graceful as anyone else, and just as clumsy, too.

The Rev. William Sloane Coffin, 20th century faith leader and civil rights and peace activist once remarked: "It is often said that the Church is a crutch. Of course it's a crutch. What makes you think you don't limp?"

What makes us think we don't limp?

This morning we heard the story of a biblical character famous for his limp. The Hebrew Bible story of Jacob wrestling with... someone – tradition has it that Jacob wrestled an angel or God himself. The text just says "a man."

Approaching the story metaphorically, as Unitarian Universalists do, perhaps we

could consider that Jacob struggled with the sorrows and hopes and fears of life itself – that he fought whatever it is that each of us may be seen to wrestle throughout sleepless nights or in the world of dreams.

But Jacob, particularly, had good reason to be up all night with his worries, guilt, shame, and fear.

He was about to re-united with his brother Esau, whom he had by trickery cheated out of his inheritance. The last time Jacob saw Esau, Esau swore that he would have his vengeance on Jacob for robbing him of his wealth and place in the family.

So the night of this mythical wrestling match, Jacob waited on the road to meet his fate, which he feared would be death at the hands of the brother he had treated so ill.

When this unnamed man came along to wrestle, we can imagine that Jacob was in a state of fear, probably amplified by guilt and shame. Maybe he thought it was his brother he fought. Maybe he thought it was God himself, punishing him for his cheating ways.

Whoever this stranger is, Jacob grits his teeth and gets down to the struggle, as if it is only what he deserves – eventually, the text says, the man he wrestled injured Jacob's hip, but Jacob still wrestled on. The struggle was long, but Jacob hung on for dear life; refused to let go, even after his hip has been wrenched from its joint. He didn't let go until he received a blessing.

And so in the end, Jacob leaves the encounter with two things: a blessing and a limp. And perhaps the lesson is that the two are not mutually exclusive, but wrapped up in each other, together transforming Jacob, marking him permanently. He would forever limp and and he would become the father of the national of Israel, blessed with a new name "Israel" - he who has wrestled with God and men and persevered.

He leaves the struggle with two things: a blessing and a limp. And isn't that just the way of thing?

For what makes us think we don't all limp, each in our own way?
And what makes us think we cannot move still with grace... limp, crutches, wheels and all?

We do not leave an encounter with the ultimate, the holy, or life itself without being marked. But neither do we leave such an encounter without a blessing, to hold and keep us.

The thing is: we are all clumsy as hell. It is awkward and difficult: this being human. We are messy, finite, imperfect, and accident prone with our bodies and hearts alike.

And the other thing is: we are all full of grace. Beautiful. Born of love itself and worthy of this wild gift of life from the moment we draw breath.

Both are true. We limp. And still we dance.

As the poet Nancy Shaffer writes: We spill not only milk but whole lives. We tear not only cloth, but relationships too, and whole mountainsides. We are so very imperfect, and yet we love so deeply that we will never have enough days of loving.

Being human, we are therefore clumsy and graceful. Wretched and wonderful.

What do we do with this paradox, but limp forward in the sacred interchange of confession, struggle, and grace?

We confess, in order to be honest and fully human. We confess our failings and fallings.

We confess even our participation in evils that hold us in their thrall. Evils of oppression of all kind. Evil like forgetting even for a moment the full humanity of the 'other.' We confess in order to begin moving forward.

And then we wrestle, whether with ourselves or with the world around us. We wrestle our demons of shame and fear to the ground, refusing to let go until they are transformed to blessing.

We struggle because grace, though it cannot be earned or bought, is costly nonetheless. It is a gift born of struggle.

But then, when we stay with it, hold on with all we have,
there is a blessing, and we find grace,
Or we recognize the grace that is already all around us.

We accept the love that will not let us go,
The grace that holds us still no matter how precipitously we have fallen.
And this acceptance is often the hardest struggle of all.

The story of Jacob continues on past the passage we read today.

The next morning as he limps away from the site of his transformation Jacob sees Esau at last, his older brother of whom he is so rightly afraid. In that moment Jacob fully expects to be slain for his misdeeds, but you know what happens instead? The text says: "But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept."

Transformation happens. Forgiveness happens... Even when it may not be earned or deserved. Even when betrayal runs deep. Even when hurts are old and long.

Instead of bringing vengeance, instead of exercising what would have been considered justice for Jacob's treachery, Esau falls upon Jacob's neck in the joy of reunion and the miracle of forgiveness. The two weep together in each others' arms.

Amazing Grace. Born of struggle. Born of forgiveness.

So, what makes us think we don't fall and fail?
And what makes us think we will not still find miraculous forgiveness and amazing grace, crutches and all?

Of course, we *do* know we fall and fail; and sometimes we even trust in forgiveness and grace. But we don't talk about it much.

As liberal religious people, our relationship to grace as a theological concept verges on being as complex and paradoxical as grace itself is. We are a people who like to make things complicated.

For one, in more orthodox theologies God's grace is usually seen as the only real antidote to the otherwise irredeemably fallen nature of humankind.

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not believe that humankind is intrinsically or irreparably fallen. We focus more on original blessing than original sin – believing human worth is not in question, but guaranteed as a gift of birth. Why then would we need grace?

Well, for one thing, though we do not believe humankind to be irreparably fallen, we do know that we humans are prone to falling, stumbling, again and again. We know in our heart of hearts that we have all gained a limp somewhere along the way, every single one of us.

But sometimes it seems to me that our culture – wrapped up as it is in neoliberal culture, middle class culture, white culture – encourages us to fake it – to pretend to be better than human, to hide our limp by moving overcautiously or never at all. Along with our supposed faith in the blessed nature of human life, we inherit a sort of moral perfectionism that is the opposite of irredeemable depravity, but perhaps no less stifling to our spirits.

Historically, this goes back to some our Unitarian forebears who believed that if we were not in fact fallen from the get go, we must then be able to grow closer and closer to the moral perfection of the divine. William Ellery Channing called this "Likeness to God." No pressure.

In more contemporary theology, I suspect that our humanism is challenged by the regularity with which humans fail and fall and injure one another through our mistakes. If we cannot put our faith in human progress, where does that leave us?

We're not sure what to do with our failures, so we ignore them, and hide our limp inside until it debilitates the spirit. We find ourselves suspecting that our worthiness has strings attached, after all, conditions we could never possibly meet. I know I find myself convinced of this, in my heart of hearts, as much as I would proclaim otherwise. I even *believe* otherwise... about everyone else... *they* are all worthy no matter what, you are all worthy. Harder to believe it of myself.

Perhaps it boils down to this: We are not fallen for once and for all, but neither are we saved for once and for all. Life is not static like that. The drama is always ongoing and we continue muddling through. But if we do not trust that *something* will catch us when we inevitably stumble, then we will never move at all.

Living fully and loving openly means messing up, and if we are not willing to fail, we will never truly live or love.

It is for this reason that I believe a robust liberal religious conception of grace is exactly what we need in our time, as we seek to love and heal the world and our own hearts. The faith that even our deepest failings can be transformed. The faith that we can mess up royally and *still* be worthy and *still* be loved.

This grace is the unearned gift of beauty in a world that could be otherwise. This grace is the miracle of forgiveness and transformation, which we cannot earn and do not deserve, but often receive, nonetheless. This grace is, as Anne Lamott writes, the: "Grace [that] meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us."

In her 2011 UU World article "Grace to the Rescue," Unitarian Universalist theologian Myriam Renaud shares several understandings of grace from our own tradition.

She writes of 20th century process theologian and Unitarian Henry Nelson Wieman:

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 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.¹

So that's one option for us in defining grace: The creative power or process which can transform us for the good even amid the depths of our failings. The power that gives us a blessing along with our limp.

¹ <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/186475.shtml>

Renaud also writes of contemporary Unitarian Universalist and humanist theologian Jerome Stone:

In *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence: A Naturalist Philosophy of Religion* (1992), Stone judges the notion of God to be scientifically obsolete and [...] 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.²

In this conception of grace we could recall the words of poet Wendell Berry: "For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free." No matter how painful our limp, there is still the song of a bird, the smell of fresh grass. There is this unearned gift of life and beauty, which need not be attached to any deity but simply enjoyed with wonder.

I for one, prefer not to choose between these two liberal religious conceptions of grace – preferring to keep an eye out in my life for every gift of beauty and wonder that comes to me unearned, undeserved and with complete delight. *And* praying for the kind of mysterious grace that manifests as forgiveness and courage and love even unto my deepest shame and my hardest failing.

Whether it comes from some greater source and larger love or from the miraculous generosity of my fellow human creatures, I hold faith and hope for the kind of unfailing, unflagging grace that can transform my falling into dancing, and send me limping forward without fear.

I see that grace, sometimes, here in this place when we are at our best, when we hold each other's hopes tenderly and see each other through the most difficult of times with a love that is bound less and less by condition. Our community is indeed a holy, beloved crutch, and we are all limping together toward our dream of love made real.

How beautiful it is. How hopeful. How full of grace!

² *ibid.*