

## SERMON: “Grace Upon Grace Unending”

First United Church, Waterloo – Thanksgiving Sunday, October 10, 2021

*PRAYER: “Holy God, who wraps us in blessing and steadfast love, our cup overflows with your goodness and life-transforming power. May your Word and your Spirit enfold us this day to call forth our answering love and our deepest, deepest gratitude.” Amen*

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’Tis the season of hillside and forest splendours when Fall foliage flashes its colours.  
’Tis the season of savouring the delights of harvest-time.  
’Tis the season when wineries roll out this year’s vintages.  
’Tis the season when as I was growing up and the air was in between warm and cool, and the breeze was light and crisp, and the clouds were both billowing and wispy, my friends and I would race to the local park because “This is toss the football weather!”  
’Tis the season when two nations and others around the world celebrate Thanksgiving time. For people of faith, that’s often a time to “*Count your blessings, name them one by one ....*”  
’Tis the season to acknowledge all the providential gifts we receive from God, and, in return, to offer God our gratitude.  
High on the list for us is “Thank you God for Jesus, who showed us what a God-filled, God-directed life can be like and look like, and who invited us to help co-create a God-filled, God-directed world.  
As the opening of the gospel of John has it:  
*“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us....  
And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.” (John 1:14a, 16)*  
It’s worth noting that, in English, the words “grace” and “gratitude” are called cognates, meaning that they are both derived from the same root word in Latin: “*gratus*”.  
Both Spanish and Italian retain that rootedness in their words for “thanks”: “*gracias*”, “*grazie*”.  
As beneficiaries of God’s gift of grace, gratitude is generated within us.  
And, we too can seek to be grace-filled, and grace-generating persons.  
How does that play out? Can we consider how we experience it in our own lives?  
Could it be that grace is in the congregational air and DNA of First United, Waterloo?  
It is being lifted up at the moment as one of the probable core values of this community of faith.  
Thanksgiving time feels like an appropriate time to reflect on that.

I FROM GOD’S FULLNESS ...

*“And from that fullness we have all received grace upon grace”, upon grace, upon grace.*  
In the numerous instances of the word “grace” showing up in English Bible translations, there are several nuances, and one basic understanding in common.  
That basic understanding is that grace is given as a gift. There is nothing we do to deserve it.  
Grace in some instances is connected with God’s favour, with the receipt of God’s goodness and blessing. Receiving such grace gives us pleasure.

Grace upon grace upon grace in this form comes readily to mind for most of us in multiple ways. Ask us to make lists of people, things, events for which we are thankful, and most of us can fill several pages of a scribbler without having to strain for examples. Just the sheer joy of being alive is a wondrous gift and blessing.

A woman I met in another congregation, who is actually related to someone in this one, shared with me that every morning when she gets out of bed and her feet hit the floor, she says “Thank you, thank you, thank you” as her daily opening prayer.

Grace is often serendipitous, showing up unexpectedly and “Whoop! There it is!”

Could be in little ways or in bigger ways: like finding the keys we misplaced, or a phone call from a friend we’ve lost touch with, a reassuring smile from a stranger, or having money flow in during a time when we’re feeling fretful and strapped for cash.

In other instances where the word “grace” shows up in Scripture, it is related to God keeping God’s part of the divine covenant: to never abandon us, even we falter, fail, or lose our way.

The extra spin on grace that is found in the New Testament witness about Jesus is that God’s free gift of steadfast love has transforming power, restorative power, barrier-smashing power. It’s for everyone.

As I perceive it, grace is the means by which forgiveness is made real, and how the healing of broken relationships is accomplished.

Grace is the fresh start we get after we have messed up.

Grace is like getting to play golf with an endless supply of mulligans.

Grace is the removal of shame and restoration of dignity.

Grace is the wiggle-room offered us and others to find our way into wholeness.

Grace is the replacement of injustice with justice and of conflicted-ness with peace.

And grace upon grace upon grace is what carries through the tough times and most trying of situations.

Grace is being blanketed, sustained, restored, uplifted, and carried by a God who with boundless love and compassion can never let any of us go.

Oh, it’s not that hard to be thankful and feel blessed when life is rosy and smooth, but when it gets bumpy and the roller-coaster ride is on, or the open pit threatens, what then?

The second to fifth decades of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe was riddled by the Thirty Years’ War.

During that war, a plague broke out. The walled German city of Saxony was sought out by many as a place of refuge from war and pestilence.

Infection spread inside the walls, killing many including all the ministers but one.

He persisted as a pastor seeking to offer solace and support.

Some days he presided over the burial of 40 or 50 persons.

His own wife would die from that plague.

In this situation of relentless death, the pastor wrote a hymn.

It started out as a table grace for him and his children.

Amazingly, it was a hymn of praise with bold and awe-filled words encouraging people to cling to God’s grace that can yet prove liberating in any and all imaginable futures.

In the midst of pestilence, the pastor, his children, his congregation sang gratitude  
That pastor's name was Martin Rinkhart. The opening verse of his hymn begins:  
*"Now thank we all our God with heart and hand and voices.  
who wondrous things hath done, in whom this world rejoices ...*  
It goes on, as many of us know, to celebrate God's "countless gifts of love" and closes with:  
*"Oh may this bounteous God through all our life be near us.  
with ever joyful hearts, and blessed peace to cheer us;  
and keep us in God's grace, and guide us when perplexed,  
and free us from all ills in this world and the next." 1*  
That's fortitude issuing in gratitude. Counting on and offering grace in tough times.  
How is it with us? Let me invite us to have a time of reflection: *(three minutes)*

How do you experience grace as in the form of blessings?  
as wiggle room? as divine reassurance?  
as strength to persevere and pass through difficulty or trial?  
How do you experience or notice grace being present at First United?  
Can you name some times when you have been an agent of grace?

## CONCLUSION

In a recent conversation with a friend of mine,  
he told me he was delighted that some friend of his sent him a copy  
of Howard Thurman's "Meditations of the Heart".  
It was even earmarked at a particular section where Thurman talked about "The Glad Surprise".  
And indeed, it got my friend calling to mind several glad surprises  
that had recently come his way including the gift of that book.  
My friend is also terminally ill with a very slow-moving form of cancer.  
He was heart-struck and encouraged by these words that Thurman wrote:  
*"There is ever something compelling and exhilarating about the glad surprise.  
The emphasis is upon glad.  
There are surprises that are shocking, startling, frightening, and bewildering.  
But the glad surprise is something different from all of these.  
It carries with it the element of elation, of life, of something over and beyond the surprise itself.  
Often the same experience comes at the end of a long tunnel of tragedy and tribulation.  
It's as if someone stumbling in the darkness, having lost the way,  
finds that the spot at which they fall is the foot of a stairway that leads from darkness into light.  
Such is the glad surprise.  
It is the announcement that life cannot ultimately be conquered by death,  
that there is no road that is at last swallowed up in an ultimate darkness.  
that there is strength added when the labours increase,  
that multiplied peace matches multiplied trials,  
that life is bottomed by the glad surprise." 2*

The glad surprise sounds like grace to me.  
'Tis the season for thanksgiving, for gratitude, for honouring and loving  
the God who upholds us, accompanies us, and carries us through good times and bad.  
For from God's fullness we have all received and continue to receive  
grace upon grace upon grace unending. Thanks indeed be to God.

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*Notes*

1 Martin Rinkart's story is recounted briefly in Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR: 2020), pages 31-32.

2 Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, excerpt found at <https://www.bu.edu/thurman/meditation-the-glad-surprise/>