



“Grace Upon Grace”

Scripture – John 2:1-11

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Randall T. Clayton

Sunday, January 19, 2025

One of the highlights of my ministry was serving as the pastor of the old West Church¹ – a small congregation that was located less than a mile from here in a very fragile part of town. It was a congregation whose heart was huge and vision for justice and equality was even bigger. As a result, over the years that church had taken some gutsy stands as it worked tirelessly to try to build the Beloved Community that we know God desires.

It was not uncommon in worship to sing a song from the struggle for civil rights, “We Shall Overcome.”² Invariably, as the pianist started the intro to that hymn, without verbal or written directions, the congregation would rise, form one large circle around the sanctuary, join hands – like this – and sing. “We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome someday. Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.”

As we sang that song with its words of hope, and I looked around that circle at the faces who were gathered with arms linked and hands held, inevitably at some point I would discover a lump in my throat and would feel tears running down my cheeks. Those tears were tinged with sadness at the atrocities, the injustice, the discrimination, and oppression in the world of which I was reminded daily. But those tears were more fundamentally tears of hope, hope that one day we would truly live in peace, that one day Dr. King’s dreams could become reality. And they were tears of joy too – joy that little outposts of love like the old West Church could be shining lights of the world that God intends.

I often think of that old song, and that old church I served, on this weekend in January when we remember Dr. King’s life and witness. And over the years I’ve wondered how he found the energy and the commitment to keep on doing what he was doing even when his life was regularly threatened, even when his home was bombed, even as he faced an assassin’s bullet. I’m told that the very last words he ever spoke before he was shot and killed was a request that the musician at the rally he was getting ready to lead, play that old hymn, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand”, and to use Dr. King’s words, “to play it real

¹ West Presbyterian Church was located in the West Center City community of Wilmington, Delaware.

² “We Shall Overcome,” African American Spiritual

pretty.”³ Perhaps it was the faith that his precious Lord would always take his hand, come whatever might come that enabled him to keep on doing the work he did.

On this weekend when we remember Dr. King, the Gospel text is the story of Jesus’ inaugural act, as it is told in John’s Gospel — the turning of water into wine at a wedding reception.

In Jesus’ day wedding services might have been brief, but the reception or party that followed was long, sometimes a week. During this lengthy period of celebration marking the beginning of a marital union, it was expected that the groom’s family would make sure there were ample provisions of food and wine for the entire duration of the festivities. To run out before the guests were ready to leave would have been a significant embarrassment and a social stigma that the family would never live down.

But at this wedding the wine ran out before the party goers were ready to return home. Whether the hosts had underestimated the amount of wine their guests would guzzle, or whether guests showed up who had not RSVP’d is not known. But we do know that Jesus’ mother saw the empty bottles, and that she told Jesus that the wine had run out. Interestingly, she never actually asked Jesus to do anything about it. She just pointed out the problem to Jesus and then told the servants to do whatever Jesus asked. You see, I suspect she already knew that when her precious Jesus is present there is always grace upon grace.

Jesus’ reply to her observation about the lack of wine sounds a little strange to our ears. “Woman, what does this have to do with me?” Addressing her as “Woman,” not “Mother,” or “Mom,” or even “Mary,” sounds almost disrespectful to us. But, in Jesus’ day, that was a perfectly acceptable way to address a person’s mother.

“What does this have to do with me? My hour hasn’t come?” There was no need for a resuscitation, or a healing, or forgiveness either. The need was for wine to keep the party going. Surely this wasn’t the way Jesus intended to begin his public ministry. Yet seeing a family about to face serious social stigma that would impair their relationships with others for decades to come if the wine glasses couldn’t be filled, Jesus acted.

There were six large vats in the room – each of which held 20 to 30 gallons of water for the cleansing of hands. Jesus told the waiters to take those vats and fill them with fresh water, to the brim, and then to dip some out and take it to the wine steward. When the wine steward tasted the water that the servants had put into the vats, he discovered the vats contained fine wine, very fine wine indeed. Grace! And there wasn’t just enough fine wine for everyone to fill their glasses and toast the bride and groom one last time; no, there was the equivalent of 1000 bottles of wine,⁴ far more than could possibly be needed or used at this reception. Grace upon grace⁵, in abundance, when Jesus is present.

But sometimes we don’t notice the grace because it’s not always flashy, any more than the party goers realized that it was the grace of Jesus that turned water into wine so the host family would not be ostracized by the community for the rest of their lives. When we don’t see the grace that’s around us our

³ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/martin-luther-king-jr-s-favorite-hymn>

⁴ workingpreacher.org

⁵ Dr. Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary often uses the term “grace upon grace” to describe the message of John’s Gospel in the podcast, workingpreacher.org.

hope flags, and instead of crying tears of joy and hope that motivate us to work for the beloved community, our tears become pools of discouragement and despair that cause us to give up in the face of problems around us and fears for what may come tomorrow.

Several years ago, I was serving a large church in another city as interim senior pastor – a church that had undergone some significant and painful turmoil prior to my arrival. One year as we thought about the upcoming Christmas season, the Session decided that it might help mend fences, and build congregational unity, if we invited everyone to a very nice Christmas meal. There would be no charge for the meal, not even a donation basket would be put out. All we asked was that people let us know if they were coming.

One member of the church volunteered to prepare the meal – I call her the “Kitchen Saint,” she’d be embarrassed if I said her name, and someone else volunteered to decorate the tables. Wanting everything to be festive, the best china in the church pantry would be put out, starched white linen tablecloths would be brought out, every centerpiece would have fresh flowers, all of which was to complement a sumptuous Christmas meal. So that our youngest people could fully enjoy the experience, we set up a children’s play area on one side of the fellowship hall, complete with a large multicolored rug, toys, and little chairs, as well as a Christmas tree decorated with unbreakable ornaments.

A few days prior to the event, we tallied the number of people who had said “Yes” to the Christmas lunch invitation. We added the names of people who we were fairly certain would attend but who hadn’t yet RSVP’d, and then to ensure that there would be enough, we added about 15 or 20 to the number. I felt certain that we would have an abundance of food, and I was hopeful that there would be an abundance of joy at the party too.

As the event kicked off around noon on the appointed December Sunday, we were thrilled at the number of people streaming into the hall that day lining up to get food from a buffet table. However, before everyone had gone through the buffet line, we started to realize that the serving dishes were beginning to look a little too empty for comfort. Yet, by the time the last of the meat, potatoes, salad, and vegetables were brought out of the kitchen and placed on the buffet table, I thought we would squeak by. There would be just enough for all. Grace!

My relief didn’t last long because people kept showing up – far more than we had counted on. I began to worry again that there might not be enough, so the Kitchen Saint and I decided to see if there was food in the church’s kitchen that could be quickly prepared to supplement what little was left on the buffet table. However, a look through the kitchen cabinets and refrigerator turned up nothing. No frozen veggies, no crackers or potato chips left over from some event, not even a jar of peanut butter. The church cupboards were bare. By the time we finished searching the kitchen, it had become quite obvious that we would run completely out of food before everyone got something.

As I fretted and worried, the Kitchen Saint began to smile, and with a glint in her eye, said, “Do you reckon that the ceremonial loaves of bread that you broke in both services are still on the communion tables?” I told her I doubted it since our communion stewards tended to clean up as soon as the services were over, and the early service had been over for three hours and the later service, one hour. However, I dispatched someone to run to the chapel while I went to the sanctuary to see what, if anything, was left on the communion tables. It turned out that there was still a broken ceremonial loaf of bread in the chapel, and

one in the sanctuary too. We brought those to the kitchen. The Kitchen Saint scraped the very last tiny scraps of ham off the bone, sliced the leftover communion bread, and made sandwiches which we put on the buffet table.

The potatoes were gone. The vegetable dishes were empty. The pineapple casserole was no more. The salad bowls were dry. And the ham bones were clean too. All that was left for the last people in line was a ham sandwich, minus mayo, or any other condiment. It wasn't much, and they didn't get the meal we had promised, but at least no one would go away hungry. Grace! And, looking around the room, everyone, even those with a communion bread lunch, seemed to be enjoying the party. Grace upon grace! And a very relieved pastor...until, that is, about 10 minutes later. A family of four who had RSVP'd "Yes," walked into the room. They were not members and had only attended worship a few times. And we had no food to give them, not even a scrap of ham between two pieces of dry and now stale communion bread. And by that time every single morsel of food had already been consumed. There was nothing more. Nothing.

The couple and their two young children went ahead and sat down at a table. As I was walking over to them to apologize profusely that we would be sending them away hungry, I noticed that there were still five pieces of pie left on the dessert table which was across the hall from where the now empty buffet tables were. I grabbed those pieces of pie, took them over to the family, and said how sorry I was. I wondered if they would ever show up at church again, but they were good natured about it, seemingly understanding, Grace. We ended the luncheon singing Christmas carols. As we were singing, I noticed their two young children were on the rug of the children's play area, smiles on their faces. OK, we didn't give them lunch, but at least the children seemed happy. Grace. Upon grace.

A few days later I ran into the mother intending to apologize again but she stopped me and said, "You don't need to apologize. My children thought a Christmas lunch of pie was the best Christmas lunch ever! We had a wonderful time." Grace upon grace. In abundance. Overflowing. Indeed, when precious Lord Jesus is present, there's always grace upon grace.

Knowing that there's grace upon grace when Jesus is present enables us to sing with conviction, as we did in the old West Church, and to sing even in this old world with all its troubles, heartaches, and fears for what will happen in the coming days:

We'll walk hand in hand.
We shall live in peace.
We are not afraid.
God will see us through, today.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe we shall overcome one day!⁶

And when we get it that there's grace upon grace in God's creation remembering anew that our Precious Lord really does take our hands, helps us stand, and leads us on,⁷ perhaps it is then and only then that we find the vision, courage, and the energy to continue to work for the Beloved Community of which Dr. King dreamed and of which God still dreams today.

⁶ Verses to "We Shall Overcome," African American Spiritual.

⁷ Dorsey, Thomas, A., "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

A glass of wine, communion bread broken, a smiling child playing, a piece of pie...they can be the very stuff of grace in a world so in need. If only we can see it. If only we can sing it. Grace upon grace. And in abundance, too. It is what will see us through.

Commissioning Prayer for Guatemala Partnership Team — Gregory Knox Jones

Faithful God, in baptism you claimed us.
By your Holy Spirit you are working in our lives,
empowering us to live a life worthy of our calling.

We thank you for this particular calling you have placed upon
Morgan, Ashley, Cathy and Carrie.
As they embark on this journey,
give them open minds, caring hearts, helping hands, and servants' spirits,
that their ministry among the people of Guatemala
might glorify you and further your kingdom.

Guide them by your Spirit, that in your service they may grow in faith, hope, and love, and be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us how to pray, saying:
Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.