

Grace upon Grace  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
Date: January 3, 2016

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“Grace upon Grace” Homily Pilgrim Church UCC, January 3, 2016, (John 1: 1-18) Second Sunday after Christmas

Maybe some of you have seen the new Star Wars movie by now. Episode VII in the saga is The Force Awakens, and it’s great for many reasons including introducing us to some new characters. Don’t worry if you haven’t seen it yet but plan to—I won’t spoil the movie! But one of the best things about The Force Awakens is that we meet a new strong female lead character named Rey. One of my cousins has already declared that she wants to be Rey for Halloween this year! Rey’s backstory isn’t clear yet, so there’s all sorts of theories about who she really is—though we know that she was left alone to fend for herself for many years. She becomes a scavenger to survive, going out into the desert daily to trade in metal parts on wrecked spaceships for food. Rey lives a lonely, isolated life.

What’s fascinating is that Rey’s trying to survive in the desert many years after the fall of the Empire when one would hope that peoples’ daily lives would be a little easier. All the events that are central to the Star Wars universe are just rumors of bygone days for Rey. The Jedis helping the galaxy maintain peace and order, the exploits of the Millennium Falcon, the destruction of the Death Star, the eventual triumph of the Rebellion—to her all of these events are legends about the ways things once were. It’s only when Rey begins meeting people who are new to her and hearing their stories and visiting other planets that she begins to understand that the Force and the Jedis are real. The stories are true. Her whole world that was once so small, lonely, and isolated soon expands in exciting (and sometimes difficult) ways.

So one of the great things about The Force Awakens and being introduced to Rey is witnessing this transformation as her world expands before our eyes. By meeting new people, hearing their stories, and becoming involved in important events throughout the galaxy, Rey realizes that the world is more complicated and beautiful than what she was experiencing in her desert isolation. The Force is true and is with her. And this expansion of perspective leads to transformation. The girl we encounter at the beginning of the movie has profoundly changed by the end.

Expanding our perspectives and transformation is what the Prologue of the Gospel of John points to this morning. This is what our Christian faith emphasizes over and again. How having open minds and open hearts helps us to understand more about God, each other, ourselves, and our world. How having open minds and open hearts leads to transformation time and again. We can reach these moments in our lives where we’re compelled to act out of love, relying on God’s grace.

One of the most striking verses in this passage is that from the fullness of Jesus we have all received grace upon grace. Notice that John is speaking about fullness when referring to Jesus—the Word that became flesh and lived among us. Our images and ideas of God are expanding here as John uses mystical language to help us see the deep truth that God is love and that in Christ we all can receive grace upon grace.

John probably knew as well as we do today that it’s not always easy to be open when that leads to sometimes feeling vulnerable and knocked down and kicked around by life. It’s never been easy to be open when facing a sometimes hostile world that too often closes doors. It’s never been easy to point to our God who acts in ways that aren’t expected and aren’t even

fully understandable at times! Our God of love who does give us grace upon grace is knowable and mysterious at the same time.

Though we know that Jesus lived a full life devoted to loving God and loving others. It's knowing how Jesus lived that helps us to know how we are to live. Jesus came that we may have life, and have it abundantly.[1]

Ann Weems (a wonderful poet) contemplates what happened when the Word became flesh and how we are to live out our faith. Good stories and poems often help us to see the biggest truths anyway. She wrote:

“Whoever expected the advent of God in a helpless child?

Had the Messiah arrived in the blazing light of the glory of a legion of angels wielding golden swords, the whole world could have been conquered for Christ right then and there and we in the church—to say nothing of the world!—wouldn't have so much trouble today.

Even now we simply do not expect to face the world armed with love.”[2]

We don't expect to face the world armed with love. Yet that's exactly what we do. Wouldn't it be convenient to face the world armed with cynicism? Acting as if nothing can hurt us and we can close ourselves off to anyone who's different because we don't need to be open anyway? But that's not the kind of life Jesus calls us to live.

Remember: “what has come into being through him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”[3]

It's almost impossible to hide light. No matter how hard we may try, light has a way of breaking forth. The new day will dawn. Likewise, it's almost impossible to discount God's grace—because in Jesus we receive grace upon grace. That grace breaks forth because there's a relentlessness about God's love for us.

What Christians have come to trust throughout the years is that grace helps express the character of God. We trust that God is love. We trust that God is moved to be with us, to bring us back home to God, and to restore us no matter where we've been or what we've done or left undone. This love is unmotivated and spontaneous and clings to us with a tenacity that will never let us go. Grace is God's loving character in action. Grace shows us that God has always and will always be with us through it all. And so we face the world armed with love.

In the New Testament, Paul uses “grace” 101 times. It's pretty clear that grace is a central idea to Paul's theology.[4] Perhaps it's because Paul experienced God's grace in a profound way when he had a religious experience of the Risen Christ on the Road to Damascus and saw the light. Turning from one of the biggest persecutors of the Jesus Movement to its biggest advocate in the blink of an eye is certainly a grace-filled moment that stayed with Paul forever. Paul's experience of God's grace helped him to understand our mysterious God and share that understanding with us. Paul's experience of God's grace led to a transformed life—and Paul facing the world armed with love.

So on this first Sunday of 2016, we may be in need of transformation. We may be longing for God's grace. We may feel like Rey in *The Force Awakens*—like we're trying to find salvageable metal parts in an endless desert, often feeling disconnected from a deeper purpose. Yet we know that our lives can be expanded when we meet new people and hear their stories and travel to new places and experience new things, always trying our best to act out of love no matter what. Christians knew back in the beginning and we can remember now that we do

face the world armed with love in 2016 and beyond. That love that will never let us go. That love that is stronger than we can ever know. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.

[1] John 10:10

[2] Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*.

[3] John 1:3-5.

[4] Martin E. Marty, "Grace," in Donald W. Musser & Joseph L. Price, Eds., *New & Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology*, 225-226.