

## **“Graces Known and Unknown”**

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**October 10, 2010**

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Imagine yourself as a young child, walking with your mother all day in a large shopping mall. Let's say you are four. All day long you have been tethered to her hand, sometimes gladly, sometimes against your will. But whether you are compliantly holding on or fighting for independence, you start to take it for granted. A four-year-old's attention doesn't take much to wander. And your mother's vigilance, fierce and sometimes irritating, will usually compensate for you. But for one moment, something distracts her. A particular dress, a rude clerk, fatigue. She lets go of your hand. You keep on walking. Suddenly you look up, and she is gone. How do you feel? Everything that has held your world in place is gone. Her familiar shape, her face, the light in her eyes that tells you who you are – gone. The store's bright lights hurt your eyes. The world is filled with terrifying strangers, and you are lost. Then something happens. One of these strangers hears you crying and tells a clerk, who calls your mother's name over the intercom. You may have no awareness of these actions whatsoever. All you know is that just as suddenly, she comes rushing into view, and scoops you up in her arms. You smell the distinct, my-mother combination of perfume and sweat. You taste the hot, wet salt of her tears as you press your cheek to hers. Your world is safe again. Have you ever experienced something like this? If you have, or if you can even imagine it, you can understand grace.

Grace, Paul Tillich tells us, comes after we have been separated – from ourselves, from one another, and from God. Grace comes in being found after being wretchedly lost. It comes when we can't think our way, charm our way, earn our way or buy our way out of whatever fix we're in, can't possibly find our way home again. It is utter acceptance for who we are, no matter what has happened. It is not something we can fully analyze or understand, but must simply accept.

The song “Amazing Grace” talks about this state. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” A lot of us can't sing that word, “wretch”, and our hymnal offers a nicer word “soul” as a substitute. I used to sing the word “soul” until I heard the story of how this song came to be written. Its composer, John Newton, was a slave trader, getting rich buying and selling human beings. For years he could ignore the misery he inflicted on hundreds of men and women, but there came a time – whether it was a blinding flash or a gradual dawning I don't know – but there came a time that he couldn't do it any longer. The story goes that he actually turned a ship full of slaves around, back to Africa. Something got through to him. He saw that he was separated from his God – that is, the source of love and power and meaning – and the world he found himself in was as desolate and terrifying as it was for a four-year-old lost in a

department store. After his encounter with grace, he could write, “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

Judy Collins, whose signature piece is a soaring, lyrical rendition of “Amazing Grace”, described in an interview why she has sung it so many times, why it’s such an important song for her. It’s an experience she knows well, being “at the end of the road with no alternatives and no options. And suddenly,” she says, “from somewhere comes that inspiration – so that instead of death and devastation, you are in the clouds, singing songs of glory.”

So now when I come to that point in the song, I sing the word “wretch”. Not because I believe that I am at my core a wretched person, or that this word captures the totality of my nature, but because I have known wretchedness. I have been lost and broken, alone and afraid. When I was 11 and my mother died. When I was 22 and single and afraid I might be pregnant. When I was 42 and married and told that I would never be pregnant. If we are honest, we have all been wretched. Whether it’s been because of something we’ve done, or something that was not our fault at all, it doesn’t matter. We get separated. We get lost. We are wretched. I need a song that says, yes, even then, even when I feel this way, grace is there for me.

I think about the profound sense of separation that must have been in the mind and heart of Tyler Clementi, the freshman at Rutgers University who committed suicide on September 22. Tyler had asked his roommate, Dharun Ravi, for use of their dorm room for a romantic encounter one night. Dharun decided to turn on his computer with a remote device and to activate the webcam. The video camera picked up Tyler having sex with another boy. And it went further. Dharun streamed this video live onto the internet, broadcasting it for all the world to see. Tyler could not bear the humiliating taunts and insults from the scores of people who saw him. A few days later, he jumped off the George Washington Bridge and ended his life.

My colleague, the Rev. Peter Friedrichs, points out that the media have minimized the fact that Tyler felt the toxic levels of shame that he did, not merely because his privacy was invaded, but because he was gay. If he had been filmed having sex with a girl, he would be considered a hero by his friends. This same week, we heard stories about 3 other suicides of young boys: 15-year-old Billy Lucas of Greenburg, Indiana, 13-year-old Asher Brown from suburban Houston, and 13-year-old, Seth Walsh of Techachapi, California. Billy Lucas, Asher Brown, Seth Walsh, and Tyler Clementi all ended their lives because they were being bullied. All for being gay.

We are heartbroken over this. Heartbroken. And I was shocked. Today? I thought. With same-sex marriage becoming legal in 5 states, and recognized in 5 more, activists making such gains in civil rights everywhere? Homophobia is fading out, I thought; it’s a product of previous generations and is being bred out of young people today. More and more people have come out of the closet. In fact, tomorrow is National Coming Out Day, which honors the courage it takes to reveal that you are gay or lesbian. The fact that we have a National Coming Out Day, and pride parades, and gay/straight alliance groups, and P-FLAG for parents and

families should mean something. But most of all, I was shocked because more and more people know, love and respect people who are gay, and it has become so, well, ordinary. Normal.

And, it turns out, so is homophobia. Normal. So is hatred and punishment of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered. Normal. So is internalized shame over being gay. These are all normal, too, as any “out” gay person can tell you. And so is suicide and attempted suicide for gay youth. Still maddeningly, wretchedly normal. Gay youth are still four times as likely to commit suicide as their straight counterparts.

For any of you, who have had suicide touch your lives, you understand something of the grief that their families are facing. *It leaves a chronic absence*, said Judy Collins. Her only son, Clark, committed suicide in 1992 at the age of 33. “*Nothing ever fills that hole*” she said. And yet, she still sings that song, “Amazing Grace”.

So where, you might wonder, is the grace in all of this? I still treasure the words of the Psalmist: “Weeping may linger with the night, but joy comes with the morning.” I still find Paul Tillich’s words thrilling and true. “When despair destroys all joy and courage, sometimes a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know.’” I love this, I believe in it. And where was this for Tyler Clementi? Where was it for his family?

The difficult word in Paul Tillich’s description of grace is “sometimes”. *Sometimes* we hear the voice, he says. *Sometimes* we are struck by grace. We don’t control it. If we see God as a being who will *sometimes* scoop us up like our mother and will *sometimes* choose not to, then grace becomes useless. If we see grace as hit or miss, that might occur if we get particularly lucky, that doesn’t leave us with much to rely on. But if we see God as the deepest source of love there is, a love that exists in everything and everyone and makes up the fabric of the universe, and holds us together, grace may exist. For all of us. There is an interdependent web, our seventh principle proclaims, whether you call it God or not, that includes all people, all of the natural world, the good, the bad, the indifferent. God is not in any individual element or person but the connection between them. In this way of thinking, our capacity to love, our ability to welcome the stranger, become a part of God. And what we do matters because we are connected to everything and everyone else. So we are all a part of God. And that means that God and grace are definitely a work in progress.

We may not be in a state of grace right now, in respecting the worth and dignity of gay people. We are certainly not as far along as we have given ourselves credit for being. But we are, I am convinced, on the eve of grace. I remember in the late 1990s, when Mathew Shepard was murdered behind a bar in Wyoming. And outrage poured in from all over the country. I spoke with my friend, Alex, a UU minister and openly gay man. I said, “How many gay men

throughout history have been beaten up and murdered?” “Thousands,” he said. “And how many people mourned their deaths?” He said, “None.” Something is different now, something has changed. We have decided that this is intolerable. Something is different now, something has emerged, that yearns for deep acceptance for everyone. We’re not there yet. We don’t have it. But perhaps the desire for it is the beginning of grace. Perhaps the outrage we feel over these suicides is the beginning. Especially if we act on it.

If you want to be cheered up – and perhaps to blubber like an infant – I recommend that you go on some of the websites beaming video messages of love and acceptance and empowerment to gay youth. One site is called [itgetsbetter.com](http://itgetsbetter.com), where gay and lesbian adults tell their stories, tell of their moments of being wretched and lost, when people bullied and rejected them, even to the point of attempting suicide - and then of finding supportive, loving friends who helped them. How good their lives have become. Another site was created by gay youth themselves in response to “It gets better” – this site is called “Better right now.” And the youth tell their stories. They don’t want to wait for college for their lives to get better, they say, and you don’t have to.

I love these videos. I love how easy it is for the youth to access these loving voices and these confident, loving faces – right at their fingertips. And they are not enough. Young people need to be supported live and in person, by people they know. I watched these videos and thought, we have a whole church full of people who would love to tell them these things. But how would they ever know that? Our church is full of people who would tell them they are welcome here “no matter whom they love”. But how would a young person find out? In fact, just last week, Eric Olsen came up to me after worship and said that he noticed that for the last two weeks when I’ve said our ‘welcome’ statement, I left out the phrase “no matter whom you love.” Was that on purpose? He wanted to know. No, I said. I was horrified. And also happy to know that Eric, a straight senior citizen, someone from my parents’ generation, was clearly bothered that it was missing. Who, outside our walls, would know this?

We in this congregation, which has clearly grown in its respect and support for gay people even in the years I’ve been here, we have a message of hope to offer young people. In our OWL classes, which teach young people a comprehensive understanding of human sexuality, they hear the stories of gay and lesbian youth, told honestly and with respect. We have gay and lesbian adult members come in to talk with the kids. Our youth group, I am told, is a safe place where kids who have an emerging sense of being gay can talk about it. And they have. For some, our youth group is the only place they can talk about it.

As I talked to one of our former youth advisors about this, I said, “Our children may be wondering, ‘Will my parents still love me if I’m gay?’” “They do ask that”, he said. “It is a live question for them”.

It is a live question. Our children are asking, “Will my parents still love me if I’m gay?” There are boys asking, “Will my grandparents still be proud of me if I want to date another boy?” There are young women asking, “Will I get the huge, joyful wedding that my sister got if I want to marry a girl?” “Will I be told not to bring the love of my life home to Thanksgiving dinner, because it makes Cousin Gertrude uncomfortable?”

You parents and grandparents may have very clear answers in your own minds to these questions: Of course I’d love you – *and* your partner. Of course we’ll always be proud of you. Honey, we will throw you as big a party as we can afford – just give us a few years to save up. If Cousin Gertrude has a problem at Thanksgiving, we will tell her politely to get over it - and please pass the dressing. You may know the answer to these questions, but your child – grandchild, niece, nephew – doesn’t necessarily.

I take three things from hearing this. One: thank God for our youth group! Thank God that we provide a safe place for kids to talk. Two: Everyone in our congregation needs to get to know some of our children. There need to be a lot more connections across the generations. Children in our church need to be known for who they are. They need to be greeted by name. You could make it a point, every Sunday, to learn the name of one child you didn’t know before. At our retreat last weekend in Camp Tockwogh, I was able to learn the names of several of our children, as well as a few things about who they are as people. It made me realize how much I need to do myself to really be their minister. We need to create more opportunities for this. We need to work on it.

And third: I urge everyone here with a young person in your life – a child, grandchild, niece, nephew, cousin – tell them you would still love them if they were gay. Tell them. Even if you think it would embarrass them – even if you think it would embarrass YOU. Even if you have no reason to think they might be gay. Tell them. Talk about these terrible suicides – you have to know that *they’re* thinking about them. Tell them how heartbroken you are. Even if you think they already know how you feel, say it anyway. Then go a step farther. Tell them that if they were gay or lesbian, and anyone bullied them, you would stand up for them. You would do whatever it took. Every young person needs a safe person in their life. Decide today that it’s going to be you. And if you can’t quite come up with the words, I can recommend these by the singer/songwriter Fred Small from his song “Everything Possible”. They’re quite powerful, so we will see if I can get through them:

*You can be anybody that you want to be.  
You can love whomever you will.  
You can travel any country that your heart leads,  
and know I will love you still.  
You can live by yourself, you can gather friends around,  
You can choose one special one  
And the only measure of your words and your deeds*

*Will be the love you leave behind when you're done.*

“Weeping may linger with the night,” writes the Psalmist. “But joy comes with the morning.” May we, each of us, be part of that morning light. Amen.