

*Arvada*  
United Methodist Church

October 11, 2009

*A Dance of Grace*  
Romans 12 (excerpts)

Marilyn Brown Oden

Remember Paul's words: "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life—and place it before God as an offering." That's what we do in our dance of grace: place our lives before God as an offering.

We begin with gratitude.

In *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, Brother David Steindl-Rast tells about jotting down the gift of the day before going to bed, a different gift each day. He has done this for years. The challenge, he says, is not finding a gift, but deciding which one to record!

We miss so many of God's little daily gifts because we don't take time to unwrap them: like splashes of color in a sunrise or the surprise of being helped by a stranger. My gift yesterday was a cobweb catching the snow, glinting in the light. You are my gift today.

Think of the gifts you've received from each other already this morning: greetings, smiles, interest in your well being.

Paul said: "Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant." Anticipating the gift of the day sets our feet on the floor each morning with *cheerful expectation*. It helps us lean into the day more aware of God's presence, and that awareness helps us be *alert servants*. Receiving and responding with joy, receiving and responding with joy—that is the rhythm of a dance of grace.

But it isn't always easy to dance. Sometimes life comes at us like a Mack truck blasting a horn. Eventually even our challenges may become a gift because they force us to grow. But in the moment the rolling dark clouds hover, lightning streaks, thunder booms around us, and we can't hear the still small voice of God.

But it's always there:

"I'm here, Marilyn. Come close."

"I'm here, Rusty. Come close."

"I'm here, Marj. Come close."

In our sick-at-heart times we desperately need God's love. We also need people around us who reflect love and grace. And so do others. The word ABBA has been defined as: "someone who meets you where you are and treats you as though you are already what you can be. Does someone come to mind who's been an Abba person for you? Someone who dances with you in grace? Do you try to be an Abba-person for someone else?"

Gratitude brings warmth and light to our lives that we can share with others, especially in their cold dark times.

Our dance of grace is also a dance of compassion.

We can all think of stories when someone showed us compassion, oftentimes through their forgiveness of us. They danced with us in grace. And our own compassion grew!

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We live in a divisive day, and compassion gets lost in the clash. Meanness begets meanness. Polarization paralyzes us. Strangers with different views are not welcome at the table. But our dance of grace is not about being *right*. It's about being *helpful*.

In an ancient story some “right rule” kind of folk came to see Abba Poemen. “Tell us,” they said, “when we see brothers dozing during the sacred office, should we pinch them so they will stay awake?” Abba Poemen replied: “Actually, if I saw a brother sleeping, I would put his head on my knees and let him rest.” (So—if your pew neighbors are dozing, let them rest!)

A major component of Quantum Theory is interconnectedness: “Matter and energy have a dual nature and manifest either a wave or a particle according to how they are treated.” Actually, I don't know anything about quantum physics, but I read that and it made sense to me. We too tend to respond according to how we are treated: An action beyond us; a reaction within us. That's true medically, psychologically and socially.

It's even true in prison. While we were in the Louisiana Conference, we started a church in Russia. Soon that church started a prison ministry. Some of the prisoners became United Methodists, and they started their own ministries. With the support of the chaplain, they built a chapel in the prison, and on one wall they painted a window with a rainbow shining through it. They also celebrate all the prisoners' birthdays each month with a lively party that includes a musical performance. I attended their June birthday party when I returned a few years ago for the dedication of First United Methodist Church of Ekaterinburg, where the cross and flame now rise prominently at a busy intersection of this city of secrets—where the czar and his family were killed, and scud missiles were made by the USSR.

The Russian United Methodists treated the prisoners with grace and love, and many responded accordingly—despite their circumstances. There may even be some Abba-persons among those prisoners. I know there are in that church.

The mystery of compassion is that it brings healing to both the giver and the receiver.

Our dance of grace is also a dance of generosity.

I was on retreat at a Benedictine abbey during the eve of All Saints Day—better known to us as Halloween (Hallowed Eve). Monks have fun too, and they carved jack-o'-lanterns and gave out candy after dinner. On my way to evening prayers a young novice with blond hair and joyful blue eyes joined me. He asked with a broad smile, “Did you get candy?”

In a monastery candy is rare. My life, on the other hand—and probably yours too—offers so much “candy” that it's hard not to take the sweet life for granted. Well, it used to be that way before the economy's dive last year.

Halloween is almost here. Remember when we were children and went trick-or-treating? We didn't think about whether we had enough candy. No matter how much we got, we kept going door to door asking for more. We hoarded it until it was stale and then threw it away—or gobbled it all up and got sick. You know where I'm going with this. Now we're all grown up, living in abundance and sometimes acting out of scarcity just like a child on Halloween: We don't think about how much “candy” is enough; no matter how much we get, we still want more. If we hoard, we have to spend money on insurance and security systems, maybe rent a storage shed, even forget what we have. If we continually gobble “candy” in greed, we get sick—sick of soul. That void we're trying to fill with money and possessions remains. Greed doesn't bring joy.

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“Did you get candy?” asks the young brother. Ahh! Indeed so! Indeed so! Then comes a cosmic whisper: “Did you share your candy?”

Not all God’s children get candy, you know. For much of Earth’s population, all the chocolate boxes are the same—empty.

My friend Mary was in the Democratic Republic of Congo serving food to the children as they swarmed around her, eager to get their one small bowl per child per day. Her eyes teared as she told me, “We ran out of food before we ran out of children.”

That is just one of a gazillion stories about children who don’t get candy. The United Methodist Women are to be commended for their help with this enormous problem.

But generosity isn’t just about money; it’s also about spirit. Paul admonished:

“If you help, just help, don’t take over; . . . be careful that you don’t get bossy; . . . don’t manipulate.”

OK.

“Keep a smile on your face.”

OK.

“Practice playing second fiddle.”

OOPS!

That *second fiddle* bit may be a good indicator of whether we have a generous spirit! Do we restrain our need to control and turf protection? Our competition and desire for credit?

Bishop Rueben Job has written a little book called *Three Simple Rules*, based on John Wesley. The first rule is: “Do no harm.” This simple rule is one we can all follow, and it has the power to make a significant difference in our relationships, our congregation and our small part of the world. If each of us would act out *Do no harm* wherever we are—home, work, grocery line, church—all of us put together would be a mighty force of change. Do no harm. Three little words so easy to remember and with so much power. But so difficult to practice.

Harm is born in our thoughts, attitudes, and worldviews often shaped by our culture. It’s interesting to me that Palestine is the place where the Palestinian Christians and their ancestors have always walked where Jesus walked, among the olive trees and landmarks he talks about in his parables. Yet even for Christians, Palestine conjures the image of terrorist instead of Jesus. Paul warned us about fitting into our culture without even thinking.

Bill and I were in Israel and Palestine when he represented Methodism on a fact-finding delegation of denominational leaders from the U.S., invited by Palestinian Christian leaders and Israeli Rabbis for Peace—for both sides harm and are harmed in this horrific conflict.

While there, I held a Palestinian Christian baby as her daddy and I stood in the rubble of his home. It had been built over the years by his father. But it was destroyed in minutes by Israeli weapons with shells marked USA. I saw them in the debris. That Palestinian Christian father had reason to hate the Israelis—as Israelis have reason to hate Palestinians. He looked down at his baby daughter in my arms and placed his finger tenderly on her cheek. Then he scanned the rubble that used to be his home and with a sigh said softly: Marilyn, we must have compassion for both Palestinians and Israelis. He was a man with a generous spirit. Ah! A Palestinian Abba-person.

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Paul's words sum up our dance of grace: "Fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out." Transformation! In our dance of grace, we change from the inside out, growing in gratitude, compassion and generosity, including generosity of spirit—as individuals and a congregation. . . . Or *not*.

If we listen carefully on this United Methodist Women's Sunday, we can almost—just almost—hear God whisper:

Will you dance in grace with me?

And will you dance with those who hunger for bread and the bread of life?

Will you dance with those who thirst for forgiveness and meaning?

Will you dance with the stranger who doesn't think like you?

Will you dance with those who are sick and sick at heart?

Will you dance with those who are imprisoned by law or poverty or addiction?

My beloved children, will you dance into my world gone awry and reflect my grace and love?

And the people of Arvada Methodist Church respond . . . how?