

Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 10, 2014
On Spiritual Convictions and What Matters Most

THE ECONOMY OF GRACE

*There's a thread that you follow. It goes among things that change.
But it doesn't change. ~William Stafford*

Amidst all of the public, professional and personal conversations about our changing religious landscape nationally and globally, whether in regard to the rise of atheism, shrinking denominations, the growing percentage of those who identify as “non-affiliated” in regard to organized religion or arguably the cynicism directed at the relevance of religion in general, it's made me pause and think more deeply about the core of my own convictions. In this particular instance, *conviction* refers to a firmly held opinion or belief. It is this reflection that has formed the foundation for a sermon series these 3 Sundays on *Spiritual Convictions and What Matters Most*. More importantly, I consider this a conversation, and though it's true that I may be doing most of the talking at the moment, I encourage you to engage, to listen with an open mind, and upon leaving here this morning, engage others in conversation.

To help us get started, I return to a favorite poem written by William Stafford called *The Way It Is*:

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There's a thread that you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change. People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it is hard for others to see. While you hold it you can't get lost. Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old. Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding. You don't ever let go of the thread.

To be sure, there is enough convergence around us at the moment in our world, whether it's the horrific violence and instability in Gaza, the crisis in Central America that brought thousands of children across our U.S. borders seeking safety, the uncontained spread of Ebola in West Africa or the reckless use of missiles to blow a plane apart in Ukraine air space has left many of us breathless and speechless. Now we can add Iraq, again, to that list. In between and around all of this I know are the personal losses, fears, despair and challenges that many face each and every day. While all of it is deeply troubling and profoundly disturbing,

eliciting critical questions politically, economically and otherwise, I want to ask us, you, me another question.

What is your thread?

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Perhaps this is a question you've not considered at all or at least in a very long time. For me, as a religiously and spiritually curious person most of my life, mostly devout, but frequently rebellious, I've thought about it often. Now, it is a question too that permeates my professional vocation as a spiritual leader on this campus. It is a guiding question that weaves its way into nearly every conversation I have with students and with colleagues. It's foundational to those larger questions of meaning and purpose, to those discerning who they are, who they want to be in the world and what they hope to give back to it.

We can look at the ancient narrative in the gospel text we heard this morning and see these are timeless conversations. The followers of Jesus are in a boat. Battering waves and dark, stormy seas render them panicked, uncertain and fearful. Diverted are they, as it is a natural human response then and now to the risks and perils that surround them, these followers completely lost sight and forgot the confidence and peace they had gained in the presence of their leader, their rabbi teacher, their friend, their community as disciples. He asked them some questions: why did you doubt?....why are you afraid?....don't you see? The deeper parallels are certainly here for us now living in a continually violent, polarized and inequitable world. We struggle with our own fears and loss of confidence in

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not only humanity, but in ourselves and dare I say with virtues found at the core of teachings in our spiritual and religious traditions.

Which brings us back to consider one of these virtues this morning – grace. We would do well to notice in this gospel narrative that these followers in fact were not

made to feel diminished or demeaned in their fear or doubt but rather reminded, regardless, that ultimately they were not nor would they ever be abandoned. A story that began in terror transformed to one that ended with recognition of these followers own thread of grace, the presence of one who had not and would not fail them regardless of their inhibitions or distrust.

It might be useful to define what we mean by grace. On a cursory level, it can denote courteous goodwill, polite behavior, a condition or fact of being favored. In religious understanding and in Christian belief specifically it refers to the free and unmerited favor of God. Other spiritual meaning connotes a divine blessing or a short prayer of thanks given before a meal. Needless to say, grace has and continues a strong currency and agency along and within the religious and spiritual landscape.

In her book *Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris recounts the story of an infant at a drab airport departure gate staring intently at other people. As soon as a human face was recognized no matter young or old, happy or worried looking, attractive or not, the infant would respond to each and every person with absolute delight. She imagines that this is how God looks at us, and longs for us to look back not only toward God, but also toward ourselves and toward each and every person we encounter - with unmerited grace. As well, the psalm today recounted the memory of Joseph, sold as a slave by his own brothers who then ultimately by unmerited grace was released and set free. Fearful and doubtful followers in a boat were seen not as that but as the leaders, the messengers of grace they would become. Norris understands grace as God's way of finding us, blessing us wherever we may be, even when we feel most alone and unsure whether we will survive the darkness.

What is our response to grace in this modern era? How does it guide us and sustain us? How does it lead us collectively and individually to enact grace on a larger

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scale? What about those we deem unworthy of it and how do we replace hostility, prejudice or bias with grace? How often do we look past others or particular moments that offer life-giving encounters with grace that remind us of our need for such?

Richard Rohr, author and founder of the Center for Contemplation and Action in Albuquerque, New Mexico considers grace in his recent book *Dancing While Standing Still* as the Divine Exchange. He writes: “The key to entering into the Divine Exchange is never our worthiness but always God’s graciousness. Any attempt to measure or increase our worthiness will always fall short, or it will force us into the position of denial and pretense, which produces the constant perception of hypocrisy in religious people.” Rohr contends that to switch to an “economy of grace” is very hard for us humans.

“We base almost everything in human culture on achievement, performance, accomplishment, payment, exchange value, or worthiness of some sort – meritocracy.” “Unless,” he says, “we personally experience a dramatic personal breaking of the rules of merit, it is almost impossible to disbelieve or operate outside of its rigid logic. It cannot happen theoretically, abstractly or out there. Our word for that dramatic breaking of the ironclad rule is grace. It

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is God's magnificent jailbreak from our self-made prisons, the only way that God's economy can triumph over our strongly internalized merit-badge system. Grace, according to Richard Rohr, is the secret key whereby God, the Divine Locksmith for every life and all of history sets us free. Life tends to tool and retool us until we eventually find this key necessary for our very survival and sanity." Yes, I would add it is the thread that does not change. Without grace, everything human declines and devolves into smallness, hurt and blame. I agree with Rohr and also agree that grace humiliates our attempts at private virtue. It can make us feel powerless. Who wants grace? Only drunkards and tax collectors, not the proper people. Not the nice or successful

people who have no need for gaps to be filled. The same Jesus who did not demean these fear filled, doubt ridden followers today also scandalously said that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for someone who is rich to enter the reign of God. We're still sorting through this moral mandate. As Rohr points out, people can't go to Communion if they are in a second marriage or openly gay, but they can go to Communion all they want if they are multimillionaires – in a world of poor people. Ouch. We can and do see these strange litmus tests today within religion that Jesus essentially deemed entirely unimportant. We can think of other

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examples without a doubt. Richard Rohr and others have helped me see that facts that were settled in the early centuries of religious history lack the moralism so dominant today across our religious landscape. They are more mystical Rohr contends. They place us within a big picture, a meta narrative where we belong not by moral perfection or performance, but by God's gracious mercy, inclusion and initiative. That is one thread that I want to cling to until I take my last breath, teach one final class or preach my last sermon.

In a way, today we find ourselves still in a proverbial boat. No one here would deny that it is dark, frightening and stormy in this world, and we seem to be watching it fall apart at the seams for many reasons. We wonder when the light might return. And yet, I'm reminded of what one of my favorite writers and preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor has recently suggested in her new book *Learning To Walk in the Dark*. (We can easily substitute me for us) "Darkness is shorthand for anything that scares me – either because I am sure that I do not have resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out. If I had my way, I'd eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love. At least I think I would. The problem is this: when despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone

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off in my life, plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their lair. Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned

in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.” Taylor admits that at this point she is more afraid of what she might leave out instead of let in. With limited time on earth, she wants more than the top halves of things – the spirit but not the flesh, the presence but not the absence, the faith but not the doubt. This late in life she wants it all.

And so, my conversation continues with myself and also with you through these weeks about spiritual convictions and what matters most. To what do we turn and look to help again and again unravel the mysteries and deeply troubling aspects of life around us? To what and to whom can we claim and enact grace, even in the darkness? Perhaps these and other questions will help us ultimately take back our faith and our spiritual convictions in deeper and more authentic ways.

And so, we end where we began.

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