

Have you met Grace?
UUF

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Rev. Walter LeFlore

BLESSINGS

Blessed is every breath I take.
Blessed is every fear I face.
Blessed is every robin's nest.
Blessed is every bough of spruce.
Blessed is every shell on the beach.
Blessed is the lap of the waves.
Blessed is the droop of a willow.
Blessed is the sweep of the prairie.
Blessed is the gable of my house.
Blessed are my family and friends.
Blessed is my love, the depth of my
strength which is deeper than
my present brokenness.
Blessed is the honesty of my fear,
and my fierce love of life,
Blessed is Love
that forever remembers my future,
and trembles with my tremors.
Blessed is the courage that I do not know I had.
Blessed is my desire that I might speak unfettered.
Blessed is the song of life
one of whose notes is me.
Blessed is the beauty of it all.
Blessed is my thanksgiving.
And blessed is my dream of peace for all those
I love, beginning with myself. Amen

Sonata for Voice and Silence
Rev. Mark Belletini

Some of you may have heard me talk about an experience I had this fall. It was a powerful experience that lingers with me still. I went out my back door, sometime this fall, I don't remember when and I don't remember if I was headed to the car in the driveway or on my way to taking out the trash—I think I was simply headed to the trash barrel to take it out to the street.

My back door sits up higher than the driveway. So when I walk out the back door I walk several feet and the walkway turns to the left and heads down a slope to the driveway. One evening, maybe 8 or 9PM, I did what I've done a million times before. I followed the walkway to the left and started down the slope of the hill. I was stopped dead in my tracks...I don't think it was a choice I made. Directly in front of me, in the sky at about 10 o'clock, was one of the most spectacular things I've ever seen.

The moon was full and incredibly large, orange and bright in the sky. I couldn't take my eyes off it, it took my breath away. I just stood there enthralled. There was a horizontal line of whitish-grey clouds all around the moon...to the left and right of the moon...maybe above and below the moon as well, I don't know.

But the moon had a boarder of dense clouds around it, there was space between the clouds and the moon, as if it was in a picture frame. Right smack in front of me, just a little above eye level, was this vision that I couldn't take my eyes off. It was so close, it seemed just out of reach.

After a few minutes, it may have been seconds but it didn't feel that way. After a few moments, I smiled, laughed out loud and said "thank you". Took a deep breath and stared some more. My entire body felt lighter, as if I had been lifted a few inches off the ground. It was an amazing experience. I had never seen the moon so large, bright and compelling. I don't know that I've ever had such an experience before.

I tell you this story because it brings me joy to remember it. But more than that, I tell you this story because I believe this is the way of Grace. That experience, for me, was an exquisite example of how Grace enters our lives. Albeit, with a bigger kick than most encounters with Grace, but this was an experience of Grace.

At some point I remembered having read something about this past fall the moon was closer to earth than...maybe ever or some large number of years and would not be seen like this again for some X number of years. Needless to say, reading about it was little more than a curiosity at the time. I don't mean to belittle my curiosity because I do pay some attention to such things. But the experience of it was so much more impactful than whatever information I had learned by reading that article.

I'm perfectly comfortable hearing or learning about the "why for" of that vision, why the moon was so large in the sky and even why the cloud structure was as it was. I know there is a scientific explanation of that event. But none of it would explain my experience that evening.

I've seen beauty before. In fact there are times I go looking for it. More times than not, when I see beauty I acknowledge the beauty as beauty. But not as a manifestation of Grace. There was something about the beauty of that night sky that was more than simply beauty. It was a gift, a completely unexpected, unanticipated gift.

For me, that's what Grace is. For someone else, it might be an incredibly beautiful, compelling night sky. There is a difference. There is a difference. I'm convinced you've got to believe there is such a thing as Grace, before you can recognize it as Grace. You could have an experience of Grace, but you'd call it something else, thereby making it something difference than Grace.

There is something personal about Grace. That night sky was intended to touch me. Probably not only me---I'm sure I'm not that important...but I do believe it was there for my appreciation and enjoyment. It was there to touch me, to awaken something inside of me. Maybe it was there just to soothe my soul. Just!

Being open to receive God's gifts is a choice, or maybe it's something we learn. I'm equally comfortable calling it a gift of the universe, or a gift of the universal life force, the Spirit of life or the Great Mystery. The name really isn't important...it's our personal relationship to that which we try to name that matters. Let me say it again, I believe down to my toes, it's the relationship that matters, not what we *call* that with which we have a personal and experienced relationship.

Those of us who spend a great deal of time in our heads, thinking, trying to figure things out, wanting to be smart, wanting to be right, (I'm talking about most of the western world I suspect)...we have a much harder time accepting a personal relationship with something/someone/an it, that, in a real sense is unknowable, a mystery.

It takes a leap of faith. It takes a willingness to truly engage that which is unobservable, ethereal, intangible, imponderable. Please notice, I used the word engage, truly engage. I did not say contemplate, or entertain the possibility of. It takes a leap of faith to engage, to experience Grace.

I'm often struck that people who seem perfectly comfortable taking a leap of faith into the belief in, and experience of, love or beauty, can become very skittish about a belief in the existence of Grace. This thing we call love is ethereal, intangible, imponderable, yet we often say we have it or seek it.

At what point does like or lust become love? I don't think any of us truly knows the answer to that question---but I suspect, every one of us would say we do know the difference. But none of us can prove it—and more than one or two of us has been fooled during our lifetime.

Yet I suspect all of us can say we've had the *experience* of love. Probably all of us can remember a time when we saw something that was beautiful and we oohed and ahhhed over it. Verbally and viscerally. We've wanted to hold it or touch it, or show it to someone, to share the experience. That means we've had an *experience* of it. Even though, we can't fully explain it or define just what it is we are responding to.

I think, and I don't know this for sure, but I think, Spirit and spirituality live in the same territory. The same territory as Grace, and love and beauty. All of them are ethereal. All are intangible, imponderable, meaning they can not be precisely measured, determined or evaluated.

So what does it mean when we say we covenant to affirm and promote the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations? Our third principle. What is this thing we call spiritual growth or Spiritual development?

Just what is it that we're talking about if it can't be measured, precisely determined or evaluated?

I sincerely believe, for most of us, we're talking about a concept, an idea that sounds good and like something we ought to want.

I fear, truth be told, a fraction of us have an *experience* of Spirit or spiritual growth. No, let me say that differently, I want to be more precise. I suspect most of us *have had* an experience of Spirit and spiritual growth, but like Grace, we've called it something different.

The mind is a powerful tool. Our beliefs are powerful beyond our comprehension. What we believe, often makes it so. Beliefs have a power unto themselves. In medicine, we call it the placebo effect. And it is measurable. A significant part of the beneficial effect of any medication can be traced to the placebo effect.

If we believe in Grace it may not heal us, but it will increase the odds of experiencing it. If we believe in Spirit and spiritual growth, as something separate from our definition of self, our ego based definition of self, the odds are pretty good you will have an experience of Spirit.

I think of Spirit as that essential part of us that is not composed of matter, that's invisible, intangible. Maybe it's what we call soul. It may be that same part of us that has an awareness of consciousness. I think it's what we mean by the term deeper sense of self. Whatever it is, I know it's different than our ego definition of self.

In order to access this thing called Spirit, I'm guessing we need to be willing to experience a sense of not knowing for a while. Be willing to live in a state of limbo. To experiment, to explore. To do this with intentionality, not mere curiosity.

Remember the power of our beliefs. If you believe there is such a thing as our deeper selves, there is such a thing as Spirit, the odds increase dramatically that you will find it and experience it. The way we engage this territory does matter.

But don't take my word for it. Do your own research, seek your own truth and meaning. I affirm and promote your right to do so. Seek Grace, seek Spirit. And let us do it together. Let us live out that part of our Principles where we jointly affirm and promote encouragement to spiritual growth.

I'm convinced it will make a difference. It will make a difference in how we experience ourselves, who we truly are, rather than who we think we ought to be. It will make a difference in how we are perceived. It will make a difference in how we experience each other and the world around us.

But don't just take my word for it. As Yoda says, "do or no do, there is no try".

May Grace be with you.