

Living the Grace-Filled Life

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I have to say that growing up or in college, I never considered being an Religious Studies professor. I never actually took a religion class as an undergraduate and instead was an Economics and Film Studies double major. At the end of college, I landed my dream job: as a management consulting firm called Boston Consulting Group, where I knew I was going to get to travel the world and be surrounded by really smart people. After receiving my offer, I went to my grandfather with whom I was really close and told him I was going to be a management consultant. As an engineer, he didn't always have the best social skills and it was clear that he didn't share in my excitement.

He didn't quite say so up front but instead of saying congratulations, he told me a story: there was a bull in a cow breeding center who had its eyes on a cow that was on the other side of a barbed wire fence. The bull's life was torture for he had to look at the beautiful cow day in and day out, separated by the fence, until the proper time in anticipation of calving season. Then, one day, my grandfather said, the bull decided he couldn't stand being on the sidelines any more and so he made a mighty leap over the barbed fence. This mighty bull nearly made it, except all his reproductive parts got caught on the fence and were severed. My grandfather smirked and said: Ands that poor bull has been a consultant ever since. I knew the implication: why don't you find a career where you actually do things, rather than tell others what they should do.

Well, I was only a management consultant for a few years and eventually I went to graduate school in Religious Studies, spending far too long in school for any healthy mind. But in some ways, I am still a consultant though my clients are students. Over my career I figure I've taught over 8000 students in class and given 500 public lectures in the community but my role is always not to share what I personally believe but help explain what others believe. My colleagues in the Philosophy hall may aim to relay Truth but my role is only to help others understand the religious lives of their neighbor, not whether they are right or not. I leave it to pastors, rabbis, imams, and priests; my role is to try to be objective, to represent each tradition fairly and try to understand how religion is functioning in society rather than how it should be for individuals. Even most of my sermons here and other places are dedicated to clarifying religious worlds for others, rather than sharing my personal opinions or preferences.

I have to say that some of my students are really curious about what I believe personally—they sometimes even take a poll at the end of class. It is interesting what they come up with—usually reform Jew, moderate Muslim, Eastern Orthodox, or Wine Devotee—but the fact that they cannot tell my personal preferences means I am doing my job well.

Today will be a little different, for I want to share a perspective that I find deep resonances with and try to integrate into my personal life. This is unfamiliar and in many ways uncomfortable ground for me, so I will tread gingerly.

It involves the notion of grace and living a grace-filled life and how this notion has evolved for me. Growing up in a Presbyterian church, I think I considered grace mostly in terms of a juridical pardon. A judge reveals her grace by letting you off easy when a stiffer penalty is deserved. And so grace in religion is more like a get out of jail free card—we deserve to be sent to hell but by grace we are saved, as if part of God (the Old Testament part of God in my imagination) wants to wreak divine justice against my sinful self but another part of God (who I imagined as Jesus' father) was loving and forgiving, offering me grace and thus allowing me to escape judgment. Grace was seen for me in a juridical context. So living in God's grace meant living freed of eternal judgment when everyone knew I really deserved it.

My thinking of Grace has really evolved over the years so that now grace has become something like acceptance and gratitude for life that God has created for me. I have come to see a grace-filled life as a sort of **trust in the benevolence of a higher power** that engenders a sort of peace and gratitude in one's daily life. Trust in the benevolence of a higher power that leads to peace and gratitude.

There is a lot there to unpack so let me share my journey of coming to this axiom for life. As I share the origin of this insight, it probably will sound like I am back in a consultant or teaching modality for it derives from my teaching of the reformation, but the debate about the reformation is where I realized how deep is this juridical framework.

For those who slept through their high school history classes or for whom high school classes happened so long ago that the classes themselves might constitute ancient history, one of the defining differences of the reformation was Martin Luther's contention that salvation comes from grace through faith and not by works. That is to say, all the Christians of the West thought that we were saved by God's grace, but the defining theological difference was whether grace was a gift for those who had faith OR was it at least partially a reward for the good deeds you did. In other words, is your eternal home determined solely by the faith you hold or the choices you make? Luther argued for the former and as proof, Luther trotted out the Apostle Paul who says in Ephesians "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." For the Catholics, your life choices matter, for grace comes as a reward for good actions coupled with faith. As the Apostle James says, "faith apart from works is dead." By the way, Luther so hated this line that he said the only use for the book of James was to stoke a fire on a cold winter's day. But for Catholics, God looked at your faith and your actions, and offered grace accordingly.

Notice however, that both sides of the issue see God in a juridical framework: it is like God REALLY wants to sentence us to eternal damnation but Luther and the Catholics are debating about what changes his mind so that he will commute our sentence: is faith enough or do you also need to put that faith into action? The context is still a clemency hearing in the imaginary courtroom of God's judgement. Luther and the Catholics were simply debating what led God to let us off the hook, when we really deserved to be thrown in an eternal jail.

As in most cases, both Catholics and Protestants reached out for support for their positions from the third family of Christians, the Orthodox Christians of the East, who were usually treated by Western Christians like the estranged sibling who only gets called upon when questions of inheritance come up.

The Eastern Christian's initial response was that the whole debate seemed to hinge upon a silly splitting of hairs, for faith and works are always intertwined with one another. They are two sides of the same coin: wherever there is authentic faith, this leads to good works and wherever there is meaningful good

works, it is driven by a kind of faith. So it should be seen as faith/works rather than faith + works. Why is there so much death and vitriol just over whether you can separate faith from works? They didn't understand the debate.

But as I explored the Eastern response more deeply, I came to realize that the Eastern Christians were working on a completely different understanding of salvation itself. The context for salvation in the east is not juridical where God is a stern judge but rather medicinal, where God is a doctor bringing us to spiritual health. The context for understanding the term salvation in the original Greek is that of healing: God saves us from pain, from division, from our own destructive selves. The church should not be seen as a courtroom where a once stern judge of the Old Testament has become forgiving now that he has become a parent to Jesus but rather the church is a spiritual hospital where sick souls find a path to health. The Christian life is one of primarily learning to heal, not one of escaping judgment.

And you see this in the Greek word for mercy that we often say during this service: Kyrie Eliason, Lord Have Mercy. The context in the west was juridical, so the typical interpretation of this term mercy is standing in front of a judge and asking to get off the judgment we deserve. However, the word in Greek has the same root as the word for olive oil. Why?

- The connection is that olive oil was a healing ointment in the ancient world—if you received a cut, you would put olive oil on it to heal it.
- If you received a burn, olive oil would soothe it.

So, when we ask God for mercy, it means something like heal me, be a salve unto me; have compassion upon me. The context was meant to be medicinal.

And so when a monk says Lord Have Mercy 1000 times a day, he is not begging for a pardon but asking for spiritual healing for a broken soul.

Likewise, Heaven and Hell were not seen as destinations that you go after your earthly sojourn but rather orientations toward God that began here each day. We are already living in heaven if we are oriented toward God and we are already living in hell if we are oriented away from God. Notice that heaven and hell are dynamic, not static; heaven is the process of moving ever-closer to your true state which is with God while Hell is the process of moving farther and farther away from God. We are all on a journey, the question is whether we are headed toward God and healing or toward death and separation.

It is a question of orientation. Notice that the very first word with which Jesus begins his ministry and first words out of John the Forerunner's mouth is "Repent!" (Matt. 4:17) It does not mean falls on your knees in front of a judge and admit your guilt like we tend to think based on the juridical model passed down on the west. The Greek word is metanoia—it means to change your mind or more literally, re-orient your mind. So, to repent is to be saved not because you admit your guilt but you have reoriented yourself to God.

And so in the Western juridical context, God is a sometimes stern judge who sentences some to hell and some to heaven, depending on faith and maybe on works. But in the eastern medicinal context, God is a healer who sends his love and compassion upon us and we either accept it or we don't. But God sends his loving Grace upon us all, always, and this is the context of judgment. The image of God casting judgement upon those in hell always did not sit well with me. How does the same God who loves me also torture people, as in the Divine Inferno?

Well, this stern God of judgment who doesn't want to punish his child but has to for their own good is a product of the juridical mindframe of the west. In the medicinal context of the east, God continues to send his love upon all people, all the time, for eternity. What changes is not God's love but rather the person receiving that love.

The analogy that the Greek fathers use is the rays of the sun: they fall upon all of us, equally. But for some people, they are received as warmth and life-giving but for others they burn and blind. For some, laying out in the beach is a suntan and for others it is a brutal sun burn. The rays of the sun are the same, but the person receiving the rays is different. Some are prepared to bear the rays of God's love; some are not but God is not choosing who to send the rays of grace unto—oh I like this person because he believes in me and I don't like that person because he denies me, or something. Rather, he shares his warming grace upon us all equally, it just some people embrace that grace, dwell within in, and find healing and hope in that grace. Others block that loving grace or are so unprepared for it, that it feels like burning. The rays are always the same.

So when you start dismantling the juridical context and replacing it with a medicinal one, the Christian message becomes one of spiritual healing, learning to accept and bear the love of God.

So living the grace-filled life is not living with the realization that you escaped God's judgment as I had thought in my youth, but rather living in such a way where you embrace God's energy and allow it to flow through you into life. It is a continual orientation toward God and acceptance of his path for our lives.

And so heaven is an orientation toward God where you seek to become a vehicle of God's grace rather than trying to be the architect of your own future. It is submitting to God's plan for healing rather than our own. It is letting go of your plan for your life and accepting the simple reality that God knows better your best life than you do. Our goal is to become ever-more conduits of God's healing love—this is heaven, this is spiritual health, this is how a world gets healed.

But there are two important realities for the Eastern Theologians about this path to healing:

First, God is the architect of this path toward a thriving life. God is the author of our story. God is always working in mysterious ways to lead us toward a heavenly orientation; God creates a river of grace and nudges us continually toward it.

But the reality is that sometimes it doesn't seem that way. If God wants to guide us toward health, it sure seems like it is us acting all the time. I mean, I face decision every day, hundreds of decision including mundane ones like what to eat and bigger ones like how to raise a child, what is my life's work, or whom to share my life with. And God may be guiding this, but let's be honest: God does not seem like a very good communicator most of the time. I mean, I may want to place myself on the path to being open to God's grace, but God rarely gives me precise directions on how to get there.

If you have noticed, God is not on social media (in so many ways), he doesn't text humans much or even offer individualized stone tablets. If God had a plan for each moment of my life, it is opaque to me most of the time. I want to believe God is in control and is leading me to health, but his directives are often less than clear.

Sure, there are occasional times when you can see God's message in the midst of life, such as perhaps when you narrowly avoid an accident or the right idea suddenly pops into your head at just the right

time. These immediate moments of God's presence and guidance can occur, but they are exceedingly rare. The reality is that God rarely even communicated directly with the saints, let alone little old me. Prayer feels to me mostly as a one-way mode of communication.

Most of us wish we knew God's guidance and so some folks treat the Bible as a kind of ouji board, flipping through the pages and randomly pick a passage that will reveal the divine path for them. Others tend treat moments of indigestion as signs the Holy Spirit is bubbling up within me and give it meaning, claiming to hear God's voice within them. Still others pretend our subconscious wishes are God speaking to me, usually in agreement. I get all motivations—we wish God communicated more clearly so we can align our lives with his will but the reality is that God rarely gives us much direction in the midst of life.

I have to say that I have grown really skeptical of those who are confident that God does. It is like the margin notes of a speaker I once saw at a conference that said, "Weak point; speak loudly!" In the same way, those who loudly and confidently proclaim God's will for themselves and others are usually masking doubts and I have come to distrust folks who confidently proclaim to be a conduit for God.

So how do I know God is shaping my journey through life, nudging me along toward him, if it doesn't feel that way as I face decisions?

Well, for the Eastern Theologians, you realize God's plan and recognize God's grace primarily in retrospect. It may not seem like God is with us as we walk through our days, but when we look back at our lives, then we gain the perspective to recognize that God was directing the path set before me all along. If we look back on our lives, we can see God's imprint in a way that is obscured or muddled in the middle of it.

- We can see how God brought such and such a person in our life at just the right time.
- God introduced us to this hobby or that community or this home right at the time we most needed it.
- We can also see how when we didn't get that job, get into that school, or find love with that partner, something better arose in its place.
- We see how our self-perceived failures actually set us up for later successes.

As I look back on my life, there are all sorts of these moments when only in retrospect, do I see how God was acting in my life to bring spiritual health and balance into my journey.

So for example, I went the same college Claremont McKenna College as my dad had attended 30 years prior. Part of my reason for going was because my Dad had gained a set of tight, lifelong friends there that was really appealing to me. Yet toward the end of my first year, I realized that I really had not found any close friends. I became sad and thought of transferring, especially when it came time to choose sophomore roommates and I couldn't think of anyone I really wanted to room with. On the last weekend before we had to turn in our roommate preferences, there was a volleyball tournament on campus and I signed up. I was randomly assigned a partner—a guy I didn't really know since he lived on the other side of campus. As we talked, he shared how most of his friends were seniors and so he didn't have anyone to live with next year. By the second game, we decided to live together and this has been the beginning of a life-long friendship. For the last decades, him and two others who were placed near

us have talked nearly every week and shared most of life. At the time, I could have never known that a random volleyball tournament would change my trajectory.

But I have many moments of this in my life: I signed up for an extra credit trip while studying abroad in Greece because it fit my schedule. This led me to my first Greek Orthodox church and monastery, which eventually led to living in monasteries for a year and getting a PhD with a dissertation on monks.

As I was finishing my dissertation, I applied for a few jobs and didn't get them. Then, I got a random phone call that Cal State Bakersfield had someone quit and needed someone in a couple of weeks. My college roommate that I met on that volleyball court was living there and a house down the road was up for rent. So I moved my family to Bakersfield. It happened to be a curriculum year so I rewrote the Religious Studies curriculum. Then, for the first time in 30 years, the one position in Religious Studies at Cal Poly opened and they wanted most of all, someone who knew how to develop curriculum. I've been here now for 16 years.

You see the insight of the Eastern Theologians is that in the midst of life, it is usually really hard to see the big picture, the way God might be directing or showing favor; when you've oriented yourself to God and when you just think you have. But in retrospect, you can see how God's imprint is everywhere and his favor led you in directions that you could never anticipate. We should recognize these moments.

There is a term from Hasidic Judaism that I really have come to love: it is the Yiddish word *bashert*, which means *Bearing the fingerprints of Providence*. I love this notion for it suggests that when we look back upon the choices we made in our lives, sometimes we can detect God's fingerprints, shaping and constructing the contours of our lives. But we only see it in retrospect. According to Hasidic Judaism, we bear the responsibility to look back and see God's fingerprints in our lives and give thanks.

So as we experience the moments in life that we will later see God acting, this moment should be marked by gratitude: we see that all these experiences that God has arranged were part of a miraculous path that culminated in you, here, now. As the apostle James says in our reading today: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." Our lives are a gift from God where the best moments have been created by him. And if we are honest with ourselves, the path set before us was probably better than the one we wanted; God has been benevolent to us. And for this we give thanks.

When we come to recognize God's fingerprints on our lives, it should also lead to peace and trust in the present, since seeing God or some higher power in what has transpired in our lives should lead to trust and security that the benevolence that has guided the past is also guiding the present and the future. Even when things seem hopeless or the disappointments rack up, trusting that there is a plan should provide peace and allay any anxiety. We can trust that God is acting, even when it is so hard to make sense of it in the midst of every day life.

This attitude grounded in the realization that we may not know what is providential in any given moment is exemplified in a story from the Daoist tradition, which I think we can employ here to understand the Christian God. It goes like this:

There was once a farmer in ancient China who owned a horse. "You are so lucky!" his neighbors told him, "to have a horse to pull the cart for you." "Perhaps," the farmer replied. One day he didn't latch the gate properly and the horse ran off. "Oh no! What a disaster!" his neighbors cried. "Such terrible

misfortune!” “Perhaps,” the farmer replied. A few days later the horse returned, bringing with it six wild horses. “How fantastic! You are so lucky,” his neighbors told him. “Now you are rich!” “Perhaps,” the farmer replied. The following week the farmer’s son was breaking-in one of the wild horses when it kicked out and broke his leg. “Oh no!” the neighbors cried, “such bad luck, all over again!” “Perhaps,” the farmer replied. The next day soldiers came and took away all the young men to fight in the war. The farmer’s son was left behind. “You are so lucky!” his neighbors cried. “Perhaps,” the farmer replied.

Now I think this story is told in Daoist circles to show support for a Stoic approach to life or trusting in the Dao, but I like to see it as a sort of trust that comes from a history of knowing that God is in control and we can’t always see the big picture. So for the Eastern Christian theologians, living gracefully means living in the trust of the benevolence of God, which leads to gratitude and peace in our lives, in the midst of the realization that we cannot tell how this drama of life is going to play out in the next act, let alone at the end of the play. It is living with a “trusting” but “Perhaps” attitude, knowing that God is guiding us to health.

So the first important reality for Eastern Theologians is to trust in the providence of God, the idea that God is guiding us, even if we see that guidance only most clearly in retrospect.

But there is a second, simultaneous reality that has to be part of the equation: that is, we are NOT just passive actors in our story. Orientation toward God is a two way street where our choices matter. Even if God is guiding our live, we have to act and we bear responsibility for our choices.

Sometimes I hear folks convey sentiments like, “Everything happens for a reason” or “It just wasn’t meant to be” –ideas that share some resemblance to what I am trying to describe here in terms of God’s guidance of our lives but they are using it as an excuse for bad choices. The reality is that if you are a healthy individual and refuse a vaccine and then contract COVID now, it is on you, not God. If you say you care deeply about a political campaign and then fail to volunteer or donate or even vote and then your candidate loses by a few votes, it is on you. No, a grace filled life for the Eastern theologians is NOT one where you passively await God’s providence and bear no responsibility for what transpires.

Rather, it is the opposite: it is one where you constantly struggle to make good choices, to discern god’s will, to heal the world though your actions. Our responsibility is not always to get it right but to struggle to get it right. Our role is to act to the best of our ability in light of the information we have before us in a way that we aim to be in alignment with God’s will, as best as we can discern it. As James tells us in our reading today, we are to be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” It is our responsibility to put God’s love into concrete action by continuing to seek to orient ourselves toward God and when we fail, to repent, that is to reorient ourselves and try anew.

We know our goal, which is what Jesus sets before us in the Gospel today: to align our intentions, our motivations, with the goodness, love, and compassion of our creator. But while we know that this is our goal, it is not always easy; in fact, it is on-going struggle of being human: try to orient yourself toward God, fail, repent, try again, fail, repent, try again. Wash, rinse, repeat.

In Islam, this pattern is the true notion of jihad, the struggle to be holy. In Judaism, this is the meaning of Israel, one who struggles with Divine. In Eastern Christianity, this is asceticism, spiritual training, the struggle to become a vehicle for divine grace.

Now asceticism often gets a bad name contemporary Christianity because it gets associated with extreme fasting or celibacy or other bodily disciplines. But in Greek, its roots are in athletic struggle, the endurance of an athlete to persevere in the midst of bodily hardship. The church fathers and mothers said this should be our model: a struggle to seek God's discernment in every decision, to apply a more divine lens to the problems of our life and society, to overcome our ignorance and egoism to align our lives more often to divine providence.

The bodily aspects of asceticism—the fasting, the celibacy, the sleep denial—are not driven by a hatred of the body but rather a quest to create the conditions to make better choices, to unwind the hold that our bodily passions often have upon us in order to be free ourselves to see the world through a divine lens, rather than our egotistical one.

But our end of the bargain in living a grace-filled life is to struggle to act well, to choose love, to seek always to align our motivations with the example that Jesus sets before us. And when we fail, to get up and reorient ourselves. Grace comes into our lives not as a reward for goodness but out of a recognition of our struggle for goodness. God loves ascetic, the spiritual athlete, who keeps striving toward getting it right.

And if we can stand before God saying that we've made that struggle, then we can let go, trusting in the benevolence of God and the knowledge that God is always guiding this journey, even when it is hard to see in the present. And thus we shouldn't worry, for God has figured out my life better than I ever could; my job is just to struggle to reorient myself more and more.

A grace-filled life is thus as a sort of **trust in the benevolence of a higher power** that engenders a sort of peace and gratitude in one's daily life in the midst of our struggle toward a divine orientation. This is the spiritual health that Jesus promises.

And compared to the juridical framework of my youth, where Jesus saves me from the stern judgment of his father, this medicinal model just seems healthier to me and better for our society.

When I had that disappointing conversation with my grandfather, I thought I was embarking on a successful career in business, and if I was successful, I would be free of his judgment. My path went in a different direction, a healthier direction that culminated in the study of religion and speaking to you today. I made a lot of choices along that path—some good and some I regret—but looking back, I now realize God had plans that I couldn't imagine and God still has plans for my future that I cannot fathom, even as I am left to make everyday decisions. And this fills me with a sort of peace that comes from trust in his benevolence.

The same is true for each of us, if we do our part of the deal, and when we fail, to stand up again and try again. Learning to live in grace has come to mean for me trusting in the benevolence of God, and seeking to live with gratitude and peace that comes from that trust. That is message I am not ashamed to tell people I can believe in.