

**Sermon August 23, 2009 “Grace and Questions” # 4 in series What is a Progressive Christian
Scripture Luke 15: 11-22 Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Hall, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver,
CO**

**Salem is a church made up of a wide diversity of people. The sign out front has a saying now
Intentional in Faith, United in Diversity. We are an assortment of people, young and old, rich
and not so rich, and those who would like more, skeptics, doubters, believers, students, young
adults, employees and employers. Yet we are all created by the Creating, loving, faithful God.**

**This 6th point of a Progressive Christian has to do again with our attitudes and relationships with
God and with each other. It has to do with our connecting with God, God’s actions in our lives
and how we respond to them. In essence it is about our faith, but more about God’s favorable
disposition to all of us, which is known as GRACE.**

**The story of the Prodigal Son we heard this morning is perhaps one of the more familiar ones
expressing the idea of GRACE.**

**The younger son knew he couldn’t earn his father’s love, but somehow that’s why he “came to
himself” knew that his love was always there, waiting. And he couldn’t have been more right.
Life and love were a gift and a grace! And plainly, this story Jesus told is more about the father
than about the sons—that is, it is about God and how we should perceive God.**

**Well, how do you perceive God? As a threat or as a promise? As one whose love you must earn
or whose love cannot really be earned at all? Do you picture God as unfriendly, eager to judge,
foreboding? Or do you perceive someone who is very accepting, that is “gracious?”
St. Paul observed, we are “saved by grace.” Many preachers and would be Bible students
conclude that “we are saved by faith by what we believe! And so they talk about “having faith—
not letting your doubts get the upper hand, and the like. But that’ not what this Biblical word
suggests at all. It says, “we are not saved by anything of our down doing, not even faith. We are
saved by grace.”**

**I take this at face value. This is exactly what the whole Bible gives witness about. God loves us,
welcomes us and reaches out to us, whether we reach out to God or not. We do not even have to
struggle for God’s love.**

**We might struggle within God’s love...that is a different story. That’s what the Bible is all about.
Our perception of God is indeed our faith, but the love, the grace is there all the time, whether
we admit it or not.**

**Martin Luther had a struggle within his soul. He spent years trying to earn God’s love; It was
futile. He did good works, he tortured his body; he became a monk among monks in his piety.
But to no avail. For his perception of God was colored by words like hell and judgment and
condemnation and sinner. And then one day, it must have been he relaxed. He just kind of let go
in the Presence of God, like a man struggling to stay afloat in mid-ocean and discoursed he
didn’t have to struggle. The love was already there, the acceptance, the good will. He was buoyed
up.**

Then he struggle, not for love but within love.

This "crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith" (Frederick Buechner) that declares we are saved by grace is so hard for us to grasp that it has required repeated and sometimes radical reinterpretation over the centuries.

The medieval church made God's grace a prize that believers struggled to earn and then felt a certain self righteous pride in attaining. The modern church has found another way to make grace conform to our puny human categories. Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined the phrase "cheap grace" to express how the Church presents itself as offering an easy solution to our problems. In a misguided effort to make the church accessible to every one and offensive to no one, we pass around God's grace on a paper plate, rather than approaching it with awe and wonder.

Paul recognized grace as the touchstone of the Church's unique message of hope and salvation. His letters began and ended with commendations of "grace." In Paul's letter to the Romans, his most mature theological work, his words on grace shattered all the old illusions of earned acceptance in which his Pharisaic life had schooled him. Acknowledging the unmanageable, unmerited quality of God's grace is one thing - learning to live with trust in its continued presence is quite another. In his second letter to the Corinthian Church, Paul admitted he had prayed three times for God to remove "a thorn in his flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7) which kept him from fully enjoying his newly redeemed life. Paul suggests that initially he believed God's presence should have removed this unnamed thorn. Instead of the expected healing, however, Paul received a different answer from God: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor. 12:9).

A progressive Christian is one who rests in the understanding of God's grace, who wrestles with it, who questions, doubts, and who understands that Jesus himself wrestled with the ultimate understanding of God's grace and love. Jesus asked, "why have you forsaken me?" Jesus asks, "let this cup be taken away" or in our language, "why God, and is there some other way."

Jesus did not put creeds first. He did not say to the people: first you must believe. Jesus put people in a position of having to think for themselves. Rather than simply give answers he challenged them to think for themselves. He taught the people to question some of the most basic principles of the Law, such as rules concerning murder, adultery, retribution, alms giving. Jesus didn't provide absolute answers because answers can provide a false confidence and security. They can provide an attitude of "I'm saved! I'll go to heaven! I've arrived! By providing absolute answers they become barriers to an awareness of God. They even become substitutes for God. What Jesus gives to the church and to us is the opportunity for those who would follow him to find the courage to pursue their questions, their doubts and ambiguity, their deepest concerns. The church in return is to be a safe place for doing so, knowing that God's spirit will help, guide and sustain. For no matter what questions you have, you are welcome here and you will find a safe place to question and companionship on the way and guidance. You will not find absolutes, You will find welcome and ways that others have experienced similar questions and the answers they have found.

The 6th point of the Progressive Christian and a Progressive Church is then one where the grace of God is experienced in the search for meaning, in the questioning rather than in the absolute answers.

When once we perceived God as friendly, as the prodigal did his father, then we feel God's grace and love. From our questioning, is born faith and courage within the struggle to know God and ourselves.

