

Journey to the Heart of God Part 6: Grace

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Scriptures: Luke 23:33-47; 1 Corinthians 1:22-25; Qur'an 4:157-158; Matthew 18:21-35; Qur'an 42:26

1. Amazing Grace

To me, all of life's questions really only boil down to one that is so simple that it cuts through the rest and confronts me until I must respond with an honest, yes-or-no answer: Do I give my life to Love?

Answering "yes" seems like the obvious answer – even expected – but I encourage anyone to think through the implications before making a response. You never know where Love will take you! You never know what Love will ask from you if you say "yes." And Love *will* ask. Love will act as if it has every right to ask everything from you. Why wouldn't it? When you have given your life to Love, is there anything Love can't ask of you?

In my experience, it is far better simply to say "no" to Love then later change my mind. For, if I say "yes," only to change my mind later, I may be in too deep to back out gracefully. It's like when you marry someone. If you decide that you hadn't really thought things through enough to commit, backing out is always possible but it can be messy.

The three Abrahamic faiths find their origin in Love. They continue to exist because, even today, at least a fraction of their adherents actually turn their lives over to Love, and Love's children. Yes, children. Love always wants to bear children with those who have given their lives to Love. Some children may be biological, but mostly Love's children are the fruits of whatever you do with Love in the world.

Each of the Abrahamic faiths bear different children as an outgrowth of their relationship with Love. Choosing which faith to follow, then, is not a matter of choosing whether or not to give your life to Love, but of choosing the kind of children you seek to raise (though they are all related).

Let me offer an oversimplification – but a helpful one provided it begins a conversation, not ends one: While each faith produces many children, the firstborn child of Judaism is Order – specifically Order from Chaos. The firstborn child of Christianity is Grace – specifically Grace that covers human sin. The firstborn child of Islam is Submission – specifically submission to God, the source of Love. This is not to say that each of these qualities is exclusive to each faith. It is only to say that each faith emphasizes one of these gifts more distinctively than the others. When we value the distinctive gifts that each faith brings to the table, what happens is that each of our faiths becomes stronger. We are able to give ourselves to Love more fully. This is one of the reasons I believe that the Tri-Faith Initiative is such a vital blessing in our broken world.

So let's consider these gifts in historical order.

Judaism finds its origin in the chaotic world of the second millennium B.C.E. According to the Hebrew Scriptures, God called the Universe into being through a single word that pierced the darkness with light and brought order to the chaotic, primordial waters. Following God's example, Judaism brought order to the world through their receiving – and following – God's word in Torah. Through the Torah, Judaism turned the tide of human civilization by successfully bringing monotheism into the world, bringing with it law to the lawless, justice to the unjust, and righteousness to the unrighteous. The Jewish people built true community out of what was essentially anarchy. They put "civil" into "civilization," and continue to do so as they seek to transform human society into the Kingdom of God on earth through acts of justice and righteousness.

Of course, our greatest gifts can also become our Achilles heel when we lose sight of Love. When we give our lives to Love, sometimes we grow a little weary of Love's constant demands. We seek to distance ourselves from Love for a while.

What happens when Order loses its tight connection with Love? What happens is you get the society into which Jesus was born. For Jesus, Judaism was never the problem. It was the solution. But when Judaism – or at least the Jewish leaders of his day – became more interested in people giving their lives to Order rather than to Love, what resulted was a cold-hearted, impersonal system that created whole classes of insiders and outsiders – and the "insiders" cared more for maintaining the Order that made them insiders than maintaining the Love that had given rise to the Order.

Jesus came not to abolish the Law (i.e., Order), but to overturn it. He sought to put Love back on top so that God's will would be more fully "done on earth as it is in heaven." He did so by re-introducing Grace into the equation. For, if any of us imperfect human beings are to live by the Order of Love, rather than the order of humanity, we are as dependent upon Grace as we are on water. In fact, more so! We can live just three days or so without water, but how many seconds can we live in the presence of the Almighty God without Grace?

This is why Jesus was always making seemingly outrageous statements like, "The Sabbath was created for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath," (Mark 2:27) and "Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone," (John 8:7) and "Judge not, lest you be so judged." (Matthew 7:1). Then there were the whoppers like, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Luke 6:27-28)

Jesus wasn't trying to start a new religion. He was trying to get us all to be better Jews by reminding us of who is the parent and who is the child. Love is the parent, Order is the firstborn child, whose siblings are law, righteousness, and justice. Without the parent, the children perish and chaos rears its ugly head once more.

Of course, things did not go well for Jesus. The old Order was so firmly established that it fought mightily against the new Order that Jesus came to establish. So Jesus essentially crashed the system.

At the festival of Passover, which celebrates God freeing the innocent Jewish slaves from their unrighteous captors, Jesus made his boldest, most indelible mark on the history of humanity by replacing the Passover Lamb with himself. It is a sign largely lost on the modern world. In Jesus' day, sacrificing a lamb at Passover was an act to remind people that God's love is for those who are in bondage, passing over the Jewish slaves while bringing wrath against the Egyptian oppressors. But Jesus knew that oppressors are slaves themselves. Their bondage is to sin. Thus, in declaring himself to be the Passover lamb, and allowing his oppressors to shed his blood, Jesus physically embodied the message he was sent to proclaim: The God of Love seeks to free all people from bondage – the innocent and the guilty alike. It was a message of amazing Grace.

It is sad that what Jesus did long ago would later be lost to many of his followers. Centuries later his followers would claim that Jesus' blood was shed only for those who believe in him as the Messiah of God. Yet those who shed his blood

clearly were not those who believed he was the Messiah! For these, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

By going to the Cross, Jesus became the very definition of Grace. The message Jesus wrote with his body and blood may have been misunderstood by his later, non-Jewish followers, but this does not make it any less real or true. The God of Love acts toward God's enemies just as Jesus commanded us to act toward ours: by *loving* them. In so doing, God provides the very Grace we need to give our lives to Love, even when we utterly fail to remain true to its Source.

The distinctive gift that Christianity brings to the Tri-Faith basket, besides the *person* of Jesus, is the *grace* of Jesus. Grace is, in essence, the firstborn child of any Christian's relationship with Love. Of course, Judaism and Islam both affirm Grace as one of the preeminent qualities of God, and intrinsic to the practice of any true faith. It's just that, for Christians, Grace is the firstborn from our relationship with Love. It is the very ground upon which any true relationship with God is possible for human beings. Siblings of Grace are mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and a non-judgmental stance toward others. These are what Love requires of us when we receive Grace.

II. How Sweet the Sound

As we have already noted, our greatest gifts also have the capacity to become our Achilles heel. When Christians accept God's Grace without turning their lives over to God's Love in response to Grace, it goes negative. Jesus illustrates this very quality in his parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

The servant owes the equivalent of a hundred thousand dollars to his king. When he cannot pay his debt, the king threatens to put him and his family in debtor's prison until he can repay the debt. When the servant breaks down, tearfully pleading for mercy, the king has compassion. He doesn't just give his servant time to repay. He forgives the entire debt! Shortly after receiving such amazing Grace, the servant comes across a fellow servant who owes him just ten dollars and demands immediate repayment. Though the debtor promises to repay him if he can have just a little more time, the servant has him arrested and thrown into jail.

When the other servants hear what happened, they are outraged and swiftly bring a detailed report to the king. The king goes ballistic on the servant. "Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for

mercy?" Because the servant failed to give away even a fraction of the Grace he had received, the king reinstated the entire debt. Jesus concludes his parable by stating, "And that's exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn't forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy."

Grace is a child of Love. As Love's child, Grace is meant to transform an unloving person into a person who gives their life to Love – which means giving Love and Grace away to others. Otherwise, the state of that person is far worse even than before.

In America today, we are largely suffering from the effects of a Christian faith that proclaims a cheap form of Grace – a Grace that supposedly wipes away all our sins and makes us free to do "whatever the heck we want." Christians may not express it with quite these same words, but what many Christians are standing for today, and not standing for, you would think that God has simply given Christians a free pass to ignore seemingly everything that Jesus taught or commanded of his followers. Do you want examples? There are far too many. I recommend just picking up any of the four Gospels and asking yourself where a Christian's time is better spent: making America a more Christian nation or making churches themselves more Christian.

Before I get too worked up, I suggest we turn now to Islam and consider what Muslims contribute to the Tri-Faith table. While my friend, Imam Jamal, might take issue with me on this, I believe that Islam's greatest gift is related to its own Achilles heel. As you heard when we read from the Qur'an earlier (4:157-158), Islam does not believe that Jesus was actually crucified. Muhammad did not believe Jesus was crucified because, in his view, Jesus was too close to God for God to allow him to be crucified. Instead, he shared a belief espoused by certain Gnostic Christians who believed that Jesus ascended into heaven to await his return to bring the Kingdom of God to earth.

While I do not agree with this idea that Jesus was not crucified (and the theology behind it), I do believe that God is so great and mysterious that God can bring blessings to other religions through their differing beliefs and interpretations. So what is the blessing given to us by Muslims who believe Jesus was a true Man of God and Prophet but do not believe he was crucified? Well, rather than Grace being their primary emphasis, Muslims emphasize *Submission*. Submission to God, which is to say, submission to Love. The very word "muslim" literally means "one who submits." As Jesus teaches, you can have all the Grace you need in this

world, but you can only keep it through submission to Love. So Islam is a helpful corrective to a form of Christianity that centers itself on "cheap" Grace.

When I speak of my faith these days to groups who want to know more about the Tri-Faith Initiative, I sometimes tell them, "I'm a Jewish Christian muslim" (small "m"). To me, this means that, in Jesus, I have received truly amazing Grace. It is on this foundation of Grace that I *submit* myself, as Muslims do, to the God of Love – and keep resubmitting myself to Love on a daily basis. And because Jesus' God is the God of the Jews, I am reminded on a daily basis that Love wants to be organized. Love seeks to order a chaotic world through acts of righteousness, justice, and other good works so that God's Kingdom comes, and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

This is how I say "Yes" to the question, "Do I give my life to Love?" It is also why I say "Amen" to what God is bringing the world through the Tri-Faith Initiative.