

## From the Pastor's Desk

### The World of Grace

Never earned, it always arrives as a gift from someone on the outside

*I am happy to pass along this article from the December issue of The Lutheran Magazine, by Pastor Peter Marty. A good way for us to start out 2011 is with a renewed understanding of the central teaching of Lutheranism, God's Amazing Grace. ~ PB*

A budding clarinetist in the fifth grade eventually asks her band director, "What's that tiny little note before the big note in measure five? I don't get it." That's when the director explains what a grace note is, how it functions like beautiful decoration on top of an already lovely cake.

A grace note on a musical score is ornamentation. It doesn't have to be; yet it is. Its note value doesn't even count as part of the total time value of a given measure. Such a timing oddity can fluster even the best young band or orchestra student.

Welcome to the world of grace.

Grace is comprised of that large word with only five letters that precedes every goodness we know. Grace is always previous. It comes before.

When the apostle Paul begins his letters to several young Christian communities, he makes certain that his friends on the receiving end hear the word grace before they even get to read the words mercy and peace.

The Hebrew people got the ordering of grace straight. Life for them began not at sunrise but at sunset. "There was evening and [then!] there was morning, the first, second and etc. day." When we finally shut down our active lives enough to fall asleep, that's when God does some of God's best work. All through the night God fashions the intricacies of a marvelous covenant. At daybreak, we get to join in the work already begun.

As pastor and author Eugene Peterson once put it: "We wake into a world we didn't make, and into a salvation we didn't earn." Grace is under way before we even reach for the cornflakes.

It might be nice if Jesus had given us a plain definition of grace around which we could easily wrap our minds. But he never used the word, much to our frustration. For him, grace was simply present everywhere. It was something to be lived, not just talked about.

So when grace shows up on our doorstep in odd-sized packages, it often takes us by surprise. It offers us help we never counted on and love we never deserved. Even if it doesn't supply us with what we want, we come to realize it provides us with what we need. No wonder Jesus avoided trying to plastic wrap this rich concept into a single word.

Of all the major religions in the world, only Christianity proposes that God's love is truly unconditional. No strings attached. No conditions laid down. No qualifications required. Other faiths have their own "earned approval strategies" to which Christians often seem strangely drawn. Maybe we are eager to believe that we deserve what we have. Whatever it is, grace is

never anything a person can "get." It is only a treasure that someone can "receive." No wonder why those grace-filled friends in our lives feel like undeserved gifts.

In a memorable "Dennis the Menace" cartoon, Dennis and his friend Joey are leaving Mrs. Wilson's house loaded up with a plate full of cookies. Joey turns to Dennis and says, "I wonder what we did to deserve this."

Dennis is quick to reply, "Look, Joey, Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we're nice but because she's nice."

So goes the arithmetic of grace. God did not love Jacob because he was a cheat, or David because he was an adulterer. God, in God's infinitely loving way, loved Jacob because he was Jacob, and David because he was David. The gospel has nothing to do with our goodness, except as some kind of by-product. It is not interested in our personal charm or brilliance. No, the gospel of Jesus Christ asks us to remove ourselves from the center of attention and to remember that grace always arrives as a gift from someone on the outside.

Lutheran Christians love to underscore the priority of grace. Not surprisingly, however, we have no corner on the personal experience of grace. We do not sight-read music full of grace notes better than anyone else. It's just that when we read the Scriptures, we find out we're in much worse shape than we believed and we are far more loved than we ever dreamed.

## Church-goers tend to be happier people

by Stephanie Pappas From: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/40557983/ns/health-behavior/>

Religious people are more satisfied with their lives than nonbelievers, but a new study finds it's not a relationship with God that makes the devout happy. Instead, the satisfaction boost may come from closer ties to earthly neighbors.

According to a study published Dec. 7th in the journal *American Sociological Review*, religious people gain life satisfaction thanks to social networks they build by attending religious services. The results apply to Catholics and mainline and evangelical Protestants. The number of Jews, Mormons, Muslims and people of other religions interviewed was too small to draw conclusions about those populations, according to study researcher Chaeyoon Lim, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"We show that [life satisfaction] is almost entirely about the social aspect of religion, rather than the theological or spiritual aspect of religion," Lim told LiveScience. "We found that people are more satisfied with their lives when they go to church, because they build a social network within their congregation."

Many studies have uncovered a link between religion and life satisfaction, but all of the research faced a "chicken-and-egg problem," Lim said. Does religion make people happy, or do happy people become religious? And if religion is the cause of life satisfaction, what is responsible — spirituality, social contacts, or some other aspect of religion ?

Lim and his colleague, Harvard researcher Robert Putnam, tackled both questions with their study. In 2006, they contacted a nationally representative sample of 3,108 American adults via phone and asked them questions about their religious activities, beliefs and social networks. In 2007, they called the same group back and got 1,915 of them to answer the same batch of questions again.

The surveys showed that across all creeds, religious people were more satisfied than non-religious people. According to the data, about 28 percent of people who attended a religious service weekly were "extremely satisfied" with their lives, compared with 19.6 percent of people who never attended services.

But the satisfaction couldn't be attributed to factors like individual prayer, strength of belief, or subjective feelings of God's love or presence. Instead, satisfaction was tied to the number of close friends people said they had in their religious congregation. People with more than 10 friends in their congregation were almost twice as satisfied with life as people with no friends in their congregation.

Are church friends special? Importantly, Lim said, the study suggested a causal link between religion and life satisfaction: People who had started attending church more often between the 2006 and 2007 surveys became happier. Again, the happiness was explained entirely by a boost in close church friendships.

"We think it has something to do with the fact that you meet a group of close friends on a regular basis, together as a group, and participate in certain activities that are meaningful to the group," Lim said. "At the same time, they share a certain social identity, a sense of belonging to a moral faith community. The sense of belonging seems to be the key to the relationship between church attendance and life satisfaction."

While a higher number of secular close friendships were also associated with life satisfaction, church friendships seem to involve something that lifts satisfaction even more, Lim said. Additional research by Lim and Putnam, reported in the book "American Grace: How Religion Divides Us and Unites Us" (Simon & Schuster, 2010), has found the religious propensity toward charity and volunteerism to be connected with close church friendship, as well.

Theoretically, Lim said, belonging to a secular friend group that engages in meaningful activities and shares a social identity might also boost life satisfaction. The researchers plan to carry out a third round of surveys with the same group of participants in 2011 in which they hope to gather data on secular friendship groups.