

GENTLE NEWS
Rev. Patricia A. Donohoe
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Text: Ephesians 1:5

“I like my life. But sometimes I don’t like the facts of my life.”

That was what a mother with a special needs child said. She was thinking about all the care her daughter would need then and in the future. She said just the thought of it made her coffee taste “like blood.”

The unrelenting care of a special needs child who will outlive you has to be one of life’s hardest challenges. Dave and I know this from personal experience. We’ve seen the havoc that results from a child who does not fit the norms of acceptable social behavior or educational programming. The 24/7 care of a special needs child is exhausting for parents, siblings, and other caregivers. It feels like you are constantly rowing against the wind and current, with no shoreline in sight.

We’ve all been in that boat at one time or another. Many of us have family members who have special needs, and sometimes we need special help ourselves.

Meanwhile, the world goes on as usual. As our lectionary texts for today illustrate, somewhere someone is celebrating a victory, while somewhere else someone takes the life of the brave or honest or different. Yet our psalm for today reminds us that the earth and all that it is in it belongs to God. And the writer of Ephesians praises God for lovingly adopting us into the glorious grace bestowed on us through Jesus Christ. Hello, God? Are we talking about the same universe?

In Marilynne Robinson’s latest novel, *Lila*, the elderly Reverend Ames tells his young wife, Lila, that he believes in the grace of God. “For me, “ he says, “that is where all questions end.”

But what is grace, and how does it show up in everyday living? That is something I wanted to explore in a course I taught this spring for Shepherd University’s Lifelong Learning Program. It was called “The Concept of Grace in the Works of Marilynne Robinson.” In the course we read and discussed two of Robinson’s novels, *Lila* and *Gilead*, and one of her books of essays, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*.

Robinson, in case you’re not familiar with her, is the recipient of just about every major literary award there is. She teaches at the University of Iowa Writers Workshop, but what she is often noted for is her theology. I would even call her a first-class theologian. Evidently President Obama agrees. In his eulogy last month for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney, he quoted his “friend,” Marilynne Robinson, when he called us to draw upon “that reservoir of

goodness, beyond, and of another kind, that we are able to do for each other in the ordinary cause of things.”

Robinson was raised Presbyterian and belongs to a congregation affiliated with the United Church of Christ. Grounded in the Reformed Tradition, she actually enjoys reading Calvin, straight up. Like Calvin, she sees creation first and foremost as a humanist.

That means loving life even if the facts of it are very hard.

Like the mother of the special needs child, we may love our life but not the facts of it. But sometimes something happens to enable us to see beyond the facts. And sometimes the place where that begins—and comes home again—is family, as Robinson so poignantly and powerfully demonstrates in her essays and novels.

“Imagine,” she says, “that someone failed and disgraced came back to his family, and they grieved with him, and took his sadness upon themselves, and sat down together to ponder the deep mystery of human life.” There is nothing “more human and beautiful, even if it yields no dulling of pain, no patching of injuries.”

“Perhaps,” she says, “it is a calling of some families to console. The saddest family can be a miracle of solace.”

Thanks to the heartfelt sharing of the members of the class this spring, we heard one story after another of miracles of solace—or instances of grace. There were nine of us in the class, including me, and five of us are affiliated with this family, which officially goes by the name of Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church, where we are the first to admit that life can be hard, but grace abounds.

So how would you define grace? The theology books I consulted stated that it was hard to define because it’s tied up with so many other doctrines. As President Obama so eloquently explained, whatever else it is, it is undeserved and unearned. Sometimes it’s a rushing tide that sweeps over entire nations; sometimes it’s a drop of clean water. Those of us in the course this spring were most comfortable with a description Anne Lamott offered when she suddenly found herself appreciating someone she had hated up to that point.

“Grace,” she says, “means suddenly you’re in a different universe from the one where you were stuck, and there was absolutely no way for you to get there on your own.”

You could also call that serendipity or synchronicity. Call it what you will—somehow there is a miraculous convergence of forces that you never could have made happen on your own.

That doesn’t mean, however, that we don’t have to watch for it. It may show up in ways we didn’t ask for or could never have foreseen. If we’re not on the lookout, it can fly right over us without a sound or trace. I’ve missed it many

times simply because I wasn't viewing a particular moment or situation through the lens of grace, through something we do for each other.

That happened recently when a young man showed up in the life of a grandson who has special needs. This grandson, who is seven years old, is blessed to have parents, siblings, and a family who do everything humanly possible to help him live up to his potential in constructive ways. He's also fortunate to live in the state of Maryland, which provides ample support for kids and families with special needs. But even all of that didn't keep him from getting kicked off the school bus, which resulted in a real hardship for his two working parents. Meanwhile, his behavior at school necessitated new strategies, including a new one-on-one assistant assigned to him. Not everyone can handle him. He is big and strong for his age.

That was when a local farmer's son who was a football player and is majoring in special education decided to intern at our grandson's school. Every morning, on his own, he drove his truck to our grandson's house, rode the bus with him each way, and was his one-on-one at school. Our grandson loves him (and his truck), and this young man is even going to help with childcare for a few days so our daughter and her husband can get away for a brief and much-needed break.

I'm sure you all have had similar experiences where someone does something in the ordinary course of things that brings extraordinary solace to a moment or situation or life. If I look back on the seven decades of my life through the lens of grace, I see countless instances that called for wonder, delight, and thanksgiving.

Just for starters—there was the time I did not get the job I coveted and as a result not only found myself on a path I never envisioned, but was able to be there when my sister needed me the most. Then there was the amazing convergence of forces that brought us to Shepherdstown and this church. Nor will I ever forget the spirit that imbued the Session meeting when our elders unanimously elected our first gay deacon—before that was sanctioned by the Book of Order.

I have been blessed with incredible instances of synchronicity time and again—but none more startling than the time that 150 letters from my ancestors appeared for sale on eBay while I was working on a book using the 150 letters my sister and I had found in a cracker tin decades before.

Perhaps nothing, however, is greater than the most gentle gift of all—the gift of listening. I confess that it's hard for me to keep my mind from racing ahead of my heart. Sometimes it seems almost impossible to slow down and get off the speedway of my agendas. But when I am able to listen, truly listen, I know something beyond me has been present. I have seen the seeds of change emerge, not because I offered words of wisdom or helped to fix a situation, but because, somehow, I was able to listen.

When you view your life through the lens of grace, what do you hear and see?