

Depth of Grace
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I often feel like I could have written this morning's passage. Or at least most of it. I have never really been a violent person, but I have done more than my share of blasphemy. On certain occasions I went out of my way to mock people of faith. Often right to their face, and with much misguided delight.

I would regret it deeply if I didn't feel like God had already evened the scales in a very tricky way. Somehow despite my mocking and resistance, God hooked me in to serving Jesus. It was a gradual process. It took years to get through all the little obstacles I had put up between us. First I had to allow for the possibility of God existing at all. Then I had to think about being a minister. Then I had to believe in Christ. Then finally, I had to feel called to Christian ministry. Sure enough, one by one, the obstacles fell as God marched me into serving the very Jesus I had mocked years before. To be fair, I was an equal opportunity mocker, and I mocked other faiths, too. But Jesus got a lot of my negative attention. Perhaps because so many people I knew were Christian; or maybe because I was afraid to love him and not sure how else to deal with it. But I tell you what: I am deeply, deeply grateful that Jesus kept working on me. I understand completely when the author of this morning's reading talks about overflowing grace and mercy. Not to mention God's patience through it all.

My twisting path to Christ has shaped how I know him, and has informed my sense of God's unbelievably large love. I must confess I am a heretic, which means I believe in ways that are not considered correct by some. As you probably already know, I was Unitarian Universalist when I entered seminary, and I had never been baptized. In my time at seminary, I came to know God as manifest in three ways as Creator, Christ *and* Holy Spirit, so I had to stop being Unitarian. But the Universalist part remains firmly in place, and my eventual baptism did not remove it. I believe now with all my heart that God loves each one of so much that we will all be saved. Not just Christians, either—but absolutely everyone: Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Shintoists, Hindus, Taoists, Unitarian Universalists, Wiccans and *even atheists*. Now, exactly how the last part is accomplished is a little complicated to unpack right now, but just as God didn't give up on me in this life, I believe that God keeps working with us in the life to come. My belief in this seems to be supported by a portion of my favorite Psalm—number 139.

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

*even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*¹

I love this picture of God's omnipresence. I find the images of heaven and Sheol especially striking. God is often depicted in Heaven, but what is up with God being in Sheol? Sheol is often thought of as another word for Hell, but my Hebrew Bible Professor Greg Mobley assures me that isn't quite right. Rather Sheol is an underworld region—a symbol of the grave, or a place of death where everyone was understood to go in ancient Judaism, whether virtuous or sinful. So, we are offered the poetic images of a place above us—heaven—and a place below us—Sheol—to underscore the vastness of God's presence. The most important part of this portion of Psalm 139 is the final verse-- *even **there** your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*² No matter where we are, God holds us up and leads us—in this life or beyond it.

In light of this image of God working with everyone no matter where they are, I interpret this morning's passage from 1 Timothy as written for everyone, and potentially *by* everyone, too. We all do our share of blasphemy from time to time. When we speak ill of any of God's children, we do a disservice to our mutual Creator. When we act against any one of God's children for whatever reason, we fail to recognize that we are all part of the same human family. When we do violence to God's earth we put ourselves in God's place instead of remembering our place in God's Creation. These are all acts against God and types of blasphemy. But there *is* **good news**—in keeping with 1 Timothy, we will all receive mercy, because we act ignorantly and in unbelief.³ And God's mercy is for everyone, even those who we might judge unworthy.

This means, especially on this Sunday which is nine years removed from 9/11, that we are all called to practice forgiveness, and to refrain from judging, so we will not be obstacles to God's mercy. We are called to forgive people who do violence in the name of God, just as God forgave the author of 1 Timothy for his violence. Likewise, we are called to forgive those who contemplate burning God's word, even if it is not our own version of it. And we are called to forgive ourselves for our own blasphemy, and to take solace in the faith that God's mercy is at work in all of us—whether we ascend to heaven or make our beds in Sheol; no matter how far we sink, God's grace is deeper; no matter how far off course we go, God's love will find us, transform us and save us.

Amen?

¹ Psalm 139:7-10.

² Psalm 139:7-10.

³ 1 Timothy 1:13d, paraphrased.

1 Timothy 1:12-17

12I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, 13even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. 16But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. 17To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Psalm 139:7-10

7Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
8If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
9If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
10even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.