

50 Shades of Grace

Genesis 9:8-17

One would almost believe we are a church in Hollywood given the sermon title's play on the risqué movie now in the theaters, and the scripture, which I could say is a major motion picture – Noah – starring Russell Crowe and Emily Watson... now showing in select theatres as if that somehow makes it important. Hollywood notwithstanding, the story of Noah's ark and a universal flood is an ancient one. There are many similar stories with other heroes around the world. In our tradition, the Noah event reveals to us something about the nature of God and the world.

The Bible is full of covenants or promises between people and between God and God's creatures. The first one in scripture is God's promise with Adam and Eve. The promise to Noah is the second. Both of these first covenants are unique because they are not limited to humans. Both tell us that God makes promises to every creature on earth; humans and animals and plants and fish and the earth itself. When the ark has landed and Noah and his family are on dry land, God gives them a sign of a new promise, God puts the rainbow in the sky. A promise to Noah and all creation to not cleanse the earth again by means of a universal flood which would put everything under water. The rainbow is a powerful image for early humans. A surprising and mystical event that is unpredictable, fleeting and beautiful. This is especially true given the belief that God inhabited the sky or "the heavens." So much like thunder and lightening are viewed as direct communication of God's power and sometimes wrath, the rainbow with its gentle beauty is a symbol of God's love of all creation.

Science has revealed to us that the rainbow is a refraction or splitting of light into its various wavelengths or colors. So what might God be trying to reveal to us in the colors of the rainbow? Well, I propose the rainbow is God's lesson to us about unity and diversity. Light, also a long held spiritual phenomenon, has within it all the colors of the rainbow, all wavelengths to make true visible light. Though there are 7 primary colors in the rainbow – Roy G Biv red orange yellow green blue indigo violet – but the scientific Munsell color system identifies 100 different colors the human eye can

distinguish in the rainbow – so I guess the sermon title should be 100 shades of grace, but it wouldn't catch people's eye quite like the 50 on our sign.

Throughout history rainbow flags or symbols have been used as a symbol of diversity. The rainbow flag of Sri Lanka created in 1886 was adopted in 1950 by the World Fellowship of Buddhists to be a symbol of the many forms it has in its essential unity. A rainbow flag was used in the 1920s to unite the worlds economic Co-operatives all around the world. In the 1960's Italian peace activists flew the flag against nuclear weapons and a rainbow prayer shawl by Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi was introduced as a symbol of the Kabbalah for the Children of Light as his followers were called. In 1978 in San Francisco the rainbow flag again became a symbol of inclusion and diversity for the Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender community. All of these wonderful historical incarnations of the rainbow remind us that this symbol is not only deep in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, but all traditions around the world.

In our time of seemingly endless division and strife in our world, as followers of Jesus we are called to be the people of the rainbow – declaring that it takes all ... all people to reflect the true light of God. That is one reason our mission statement is “to affirm all people as we grow together in the light and love of Christ.” That is why the United Church of Christ as a denomination have worked for decades to be clear that we welcome the LGBT community – because the wider church in our time, following patterns that are centuries old, says “all are welcome,” but when GLBT individuals or couples have come, the church has either asked them to change or it has pretended that they do not really exist. We have paid a price for this work of justice and inclusion both as a denomination and as Faith Church. I have seen people come here and enjoy the worship, and then when they realize we really mean all are welcome here, we never see them again. But that is ok because we are not called to be the most popular or the biggest or the richest church, we are called to be a faithful church. True to our faith and our belief that God loves us, all of us. And though all of us need to be changed and transformed by God's grace, God has no interest in changing our intrinsic nature which

God created us to be. Whether that means the color of our eyes or the texture of our hair or who we love or what language we speak or how we self-identify our gender. God is interested in us all becoming fully who she made us to be. That is why we are a church of the rainbow. We welcome all here, but also insist that each one here extend grace and acceptance to all others who are here as well. Because if blue insists indigo leave, the rainbow is not complete, the light is not complete, and the light we try to shine into the world dims and becomes distorted.

This is not always easy. It becomes even harder when we are trying to reach those currently not in our worship, younger folks, families, those not raised in the church. Attempts at attracting different people makes it difficult to figure out how to be the rainbow together. Some of us like guided meditations and get a lot out of them, some of us hate guided meditations and others enjoy a little snooze when I say “close your eyes.” Which of those groups is right? All of them – there is no one answer to any question in the church of the rainbow. We cannot be about limiting what we do, but always including more light, more colors, more graces from God.

One of my seminary professors used to talk about the ark as a wonderful symbol of the church. He said, “if it weren’t for the storm on the outside, one could hardly stand the stink on the inside.” The ark in movies and stories has always portrayed as a placed peaceful place, but there were lions and hyenas there and little mammals that they like to eat. And let’s not even begin to think about the smell of the various waste products that all animals and birds emit. Being a rainbow church is sometimes messy, we are not all violet or red or blue about anything. If I had my druthers we would exclusively sing those ethereal medieval chants that I impose on you every now and then. But if I did that, not only would my wife run away as fast as she could, but so would those who love those more modern hymns by people like oh what’s his name, ,Johann Sebastian Bach – or even more modern songs of contemporary Christian groups. As we try to grow as a congregation, we will have to do some things differently

than we have before, but never will we stop doing what some of us have loved for a long time, oh we may do it a little less, but we never want to lose any of our colors!

Perhaps one of the reasons rainbows are so special is that they do not last long. They are fragile as a butterfly's wing. But they are also created on the promise of God the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. And we as a church can be people of the rainbow. We can live into and accept the graces of God – the grace which calls us to speak our truth and the grace of God's forgiveness for our human defects of character the most difficult for me being my quick and steady belief that I always know best and am right. God has been and continues to be patient with me on that one.

The rainbow is unity in diversity, this is the delicate balance we must strike. May God give us courage and humility, strength and flexibility as we move forward together. And may God's 100 shades of Grace shine always from Faith United Church of Christ.
AMEN

Genesis 9:8-1

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'