

Grace, graceful, graciousness and gracias

BY CHRIS HIGHLAND

I wonder sometimes if certain words are overused. Maybe “wonder” is one of those? Is the word “love” used too much, or even “God”? A feeling or experience can feel cheapened when we say the same thing again and again. It becomes almost flippant, a throwaway thing to say. In Christianity, I’m thinking “grace” is overused to the point it begins to lose meaning. Maybe the problem is that even believers may not understand the meaning of grace, and the responsibility of living graciously.

If the word grace refers solely to the soul, “God’s grace in salvation,” and such, how can people actually experience that in their daily lives? We hear “saved by grace,” when a believer says they feel the “undeserved favor” of God. Bible verses are used to support that interpretation. But what if the overuse of the

word “grace,” and the associated overuse of the word in a “theology of grace,” actually misses important human qualities we all could exhibit? It may be a divine quality, but God may not be the only one who can act on it.

The newly elected Representative from Delaware, Sarah McBride, is the first trans person to be elected to Congress. Though she was attacked by the fearfully faithful even before being seated in the House, she responded by speaking of grace. We need a “politics of grace,” because we don’t know a person’s experience, what makes them fearful or hateful, so the focus of elected leaders should be the issues that matter to all Americans. I would say her “gracious” response to those who don’t want her, or people like her, in Congress, or anywhere in society, shows a character of graciousness—courtesy, kindness, politeness. She’s certainly a fighter who stands for vul-

nerable people, but her intent is to find solutions in cooperation, to “work with those who want to work with me.”

Beyond those beliefs that emphasize the grace of God, what kind of grace and graciousness can we practice? Definitions of grace include: “courteous goodwill;” “respectfulness;” “consideration;” “thoughtfulness” and more. Wouldn’t it be great to emphasize these qualities in our life practice? The “theology of grace” focuses attention on God’s actions, graciously forgiving those who believe Jesus died for them. Sinful humans don’t deserve to be forgiven, but God sends his son to the cross to shed blood so God can be happy. It’s all about God doing for us what we can’t do for ourselves. And yet, if we practiced graciousness in our lives, treating others with “courteous goodwill” and “respectfulness,” our communities, our world, would be better—more grace-centered.

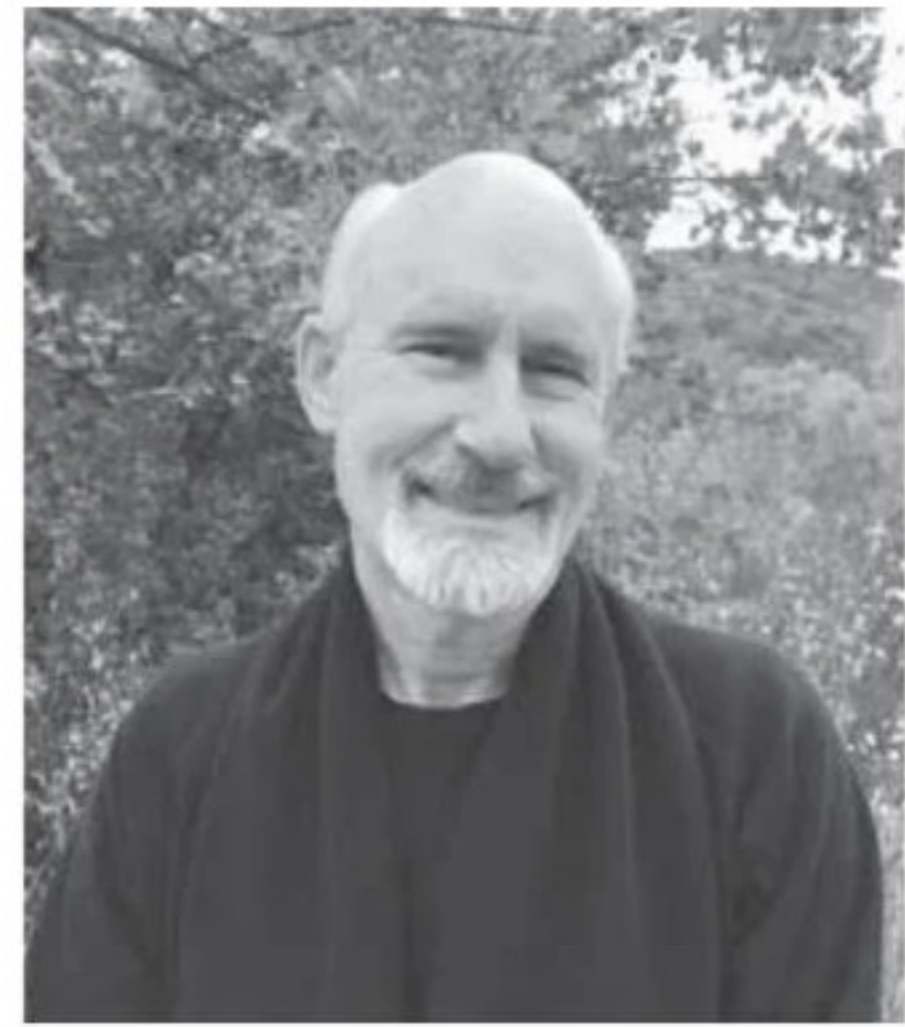
You don’t have to subscribe to any theology to do that.

Sarah McBride’s motto is “I’ll extend grace so long as people demonstrate growth.” Some will point out this is not unconditional. Well, as I said, in some versions of the theology of grace, God bestows grace IF a person believes and accepts that divine act. They claim it’s “unconditional,” but it’s not without a major catch. As I see it, McBride’s guide seems more practical for our experience, as she says: “By giving people permission to be wrong, [we create] the space and grace for people to grow. And I think we need more grace in our politics if we want people to actually grow ... And we create no space for them to grow by extending no grace for them to actually walk there.” This makes so much sense, though very difficult to live so graciously.

In Spanish, “Gracias” means “Thank you.” Interesting isn’t it? Perhaps

if we were simply gracious enough, thoughtful enough, to express more “gratefulness with graciousness” we would invite more of the same from others. We could hope. Carol and I have relationships with members of a church named “Grace Covenant.” I’m guessing the founders of that congregation meant to create something with an active sort of graciousness — “Let’s make an agreement, a covenant, to live by grace.” If that means creating a welcoming, inclusive, compassionate circle of people committed to exhibiting thoughtful, respectful goodwill, I’d say they succeeded. I’m not a member, but I can support any group that lives by that kind of grace.

I understand the desire to sense “God’s grace.” Yet, if it means you have to be an obedient servant, constantly acknowledging your underserving nature, I don’t see how this can show much graciousness to yourself. To create



“the space and grace for people to grow” should include ourselves too. We may have to admit we’re wrong about some things, even about the meaning of grace. We open ourselves to see the bigger, wider picture, which has a tendency to bring us right back to the particular, present, individual level.

Living with graciousness may not always look graceful, but we can be grateful for it.

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