
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Grace

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

Yes, grace is a hard concept to grasp.

It is usually defined as God's unmerited love for us, but talking about it this way poses as many questions as it answers.

Augustine, the fourth century bishop, famously found his faith in Paul's letter to the Romans. In Romans 13:13-14, Paul admonishes his readers to shed their licentious lives, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of its desires. When Augustine read this passage, "his heart was filled with the light of confidence and all of the shadows of my doubt were swept away."

A British monk named Pelagius took issue with Augustine. He thought we had to participate in our own salvation. God helps those who help themselves, he said.

Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and, in the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church have all weighed in with their own theories of grace and works, which in turn led to various understandings of predestination, justification, and sanctification.

I find this debate interesting, but not terribly helpful.

When I think of grace, an interview with Dustin Hoffman about the movie *Tootsie* comes to mind. Hoffman agreed to play the part only if he could convince real people that he was actually a woman. He put on his makeup and wardrobe and walked around the streets of New York City.

Hoffman did pass as a woman, but not a beautiful one. When he asked the make-up artists and wardrobe designers to make him beautiful, they laughed and said, "This is as good as it gets."

At that moment, the film stopped being a comedy for Hoffman. He cried when he thought of all of the interesting women he had never noticed because they didn't meet his standards of beauty.

God's grace is love, but it's a love that usually comes to us as an unexpected gift. So often, we recognize it in the face of someone that we have overlooked or forgotten. We don't even know it's a gift until it's fully received.

The good news, though, is we meet so many new and interesting people.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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