

*Touched by Grace*  
Sunday, November 17, 2019

Do you ever just know something is for you? In March of 2018, I was scrolling through the Clergy Chicks group on Facebook (yes, there is such a group) when a post jumped out. A clergywoman I didn't know had written, "Hey all, I was in this program and it was phenomenal! It is across ages, denominations, and across the US and Canada. Check it out." And below was a link to a post from the Sisters of Saint Benedict – Our Lady of Grace Monastery:

*Are you a clergywoman in need of spiritual renewal? Do you want to thrive in ministry? Have you been ordained at least 5 years? Do you yearn to belong to a community of like-minded women who will support you for a lifetime? As you lead your congregation, do you feel like a stray dog at the whistler's convention? Then Women Touched by Grace is for YOU!*

*Hosted by the Sisters of St. Benedict of Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana, this Lilly Endowment funded program has a 15-year history of ministering to Protestant clergywomen in an atmosphere of prayer and hospitality.*

*For additional information and an application form, visit [www.wtbg.org](http://www.wtbg.org).*

So I did. The brochure explained:

*Women clergy experience unique challenges within ministry including creating community, sexism in church structures, availability of call, recognition of their ministerial authority, and finding time to attend to their own spiritual life. Women Touched by Grace is an opportunity for women pastors to live in a Benedictine monastic setting and to form community through five ten-day retreats that will support and equip them to navigate and address the joys and challenges of ministry. The retreats will help women pastors establish a rhythm of prayer, engage in spiritual disciplines, build into their daily life a time to step aside and give praise to the Creator of all things, and to relax in the presence of women of faith. They will be given tools that can assist them through the many transitions that women pastors experience. Developing peer support groups and mentoring relationships will be an integral part of this program. Participants will also be expected to take what they learn and share it with their congregations.*

And that's when I knew I had to take part. The Parish Committee agreed to let me use some of the 6 months of sabbatical time I had earned in 5 14-day chunks

over the two years of the program. I wrote the application, got references, and waited. I wasn't sure I'd get in – the program only accepts 20 clergy each time and I knew that since it was one of the Lilly Foundation programs for Excellence in Ministry that it would be good and so would attract lots of applicants.

In June of 2018 I got word that I had been accepted – the first Unitarian Universalist to participate – and I now have participated in three of the five retreats. I'm just back from the third one, and though technically the sabbatical time extends through today, I realized that I haven't been sharing with you about it and so that's what I'm doing this morning. And as I tell you about my experience with Women Touched by Grace, I ask you to think about what jumps out at you. Mark the points where you think, "I want that in my life!" Or "We need to do that here!" Hold them in your head, jot them on the back of the hymn insert – whatever you need to do to remember them.

One of the many things I love about WTbG, as we call it, and being at the monastery, is the rhythm of prayer and song. Every day at 8 a.m., noon, and 5:45 p.m. the Benedictine sisters hold a prayer service in their lovely chapel and we are invited to take part in it. I was a little wary at first, afraid that I would feel excluded by the theology of the service, but it is so open that I can participate alongside the sisters and the other women clergy. We sing and recite psalms, say the Lord's Prayer, and hear a reading from the Bible. There is no creed, no sermon; it's all left to your own interpretation. Over this last period, the readings in Morning Prayer were from the Book of Daniel, and it was like a cliff-hanger – with the evil King Nebuchadnezzar decreeing that everyone must bow down to a golden staff as a sign of his power, and the Jewish Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego refusing to shift their allegiance from the God of Israel to worship a human being. Even though we all knew the story of the fiery furnace and their rescue from it, the installments each morning left us wanting more.

At 9:15 each morning we gather for our program. We begin with the WTbG prayer and then sing *Touched by Grace* which was written by one of the Sisters when the program first started. We are now going to sing it together. Just a word – I know that you are not all women and ordinarily Beth and I wouldn't have you sing something which excludes half of the congregation. But we're not singing this as a hymn of expression but as a way of your sharing my experience. So I invite you now to stand as you are able. The hymn is on the insert in your order of service. ...

After the hymn, Sister Luke, the director of the program, leads announcements and the sharing of joys and sorrows, and then we get started. Another reason I wanted you to sing *Touched by Grace* is that the verses sort of outline the topics we've covered. "Come together.... Be gifts for one another" in the first verse aligns with our first topic last November, "Women Creating Community;" "Learn forms of contemplation" in the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse is what we did last May in "The Practices of the Spiritual Life;" and "Practice skills that form a leader" was this retreat with "Transitions: Turning the Pages of our Lives."

In the first retreat last November we both learned about community and created community. It amazed me even at the time to see how in 10 days our group of twenty women clergy went from strangers to sisters. We came from all over the United States; we range in age from 30's to 60's; we are African American and white, gay and straight, partnered and single; with young children, grown children, no children. We are Episcopal, United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, Non-Denominational, Baptist, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and of course Unitarian Universalist. We are all on the liberal side in our denominations, which I guess makes sense when you think that aside from the Unitarian Universalists and the United Church of Christ, both of which began ordaining women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these other denominations didn't ordain women until the mid or late 20<sup>th</sup> century and women clergy are still suspect in many of their congregations.

Here are some of the ways we formed community in our 10 days together: we prayed together and ate together; we hung out in the common lounge after the evening programs were finished, drinking wine, eating chocolate, and sharing our stories. We took walks and had a free afternoon to tour Indianapolis together. We began to laugh together. We were assigned to small groups of 5, arranged purposely so that no one of the same denomination was together, and we did a practice of *lectio divina* on our lives. We've done *lectio divina* here a few times – it's a practice of reading something – scripture, a poem, or a passage, and going through a reflection process. But this was different. The *lectio* was our stories. In turn over the 10 days, each of us shared a story about our ministry, all something we were grappling with, and then the group sat in silence for 3-5 minutes, reflecting on the story. At the end of the silence, each of the listeners shared a word or phrase that stood out for her in the story. Then we sat in silence for another 3-5 minutes. At the end of that silence, each of the listeners told what message she heard from the story and what seemed most important to the storyteller as she told the story. Then we had another 3-5 minutes of silence and at the end of that silence, each person

shared how she heard God speaking to the teller of the story. How might this story be a sign of a nudge in a new direction? Then we prayed for the storyteller. Simple but intense. We had a box of Kleenex which got used, and not just by the storyteller. We stay in the same small group throughout the program, and most of the groups, like mine, meet regularly over Zoom or Skype to continue to support each other. One of the WTbG clergy described her experience: “The first session I came because I needed to get away; the second session I came because of the topic; this time I’m coming because of you all.”

So those are some of the ways we have built community. We also learned in the first session about the theory of what makes a strong community.

I admit to you that I was skeptical as the program began last November when I realized that our presenter was a Benedictine Sister from another monastery and that she was going to talk to us for a total of 12 hours about Benedict, the communities he established, and the rule he used to organize them. “What relevance could a 6th century monk have for me today?” But I quickly found myself taking notes – not something I do often. For Benedict in his time was also facing a world where old norms were changing, a time of wars, conflicts, and fear. In response he set up communities of monks, separate ones for men and women, with women leaders in their communities – pretty progressive for that time – with the idea that the peace created in these places would flow out to offer peace to the world. And the communities were based not on creed or belief, but on how the monks would be in community together – just as our congregation today is not based on defined beliefs but on our covenant which describes how we will be together.

Benedict’s rule gets pretty detailed as to the schedules of the days, the meals, the work (and each monk was expected to do the chores of their communal life – not just the poorer monks as in some places), and what they would wear, but the general principles are still relevant today. For Benedictines, the first rule is hospitality – to welcome the stranger. Benedictines will put aside other rules, such as times of silence and fasting, to welcome their visitors. And this is why today many Benedictines, such as Sister Joan Chittister, have been speaking and acting about the need to welcome refugees to our country and about the need to practice welcome and inclusion in general as a society. While I was at Beech Grove this time, Sister Sheila, one of the nuns there, had driven a van of supplies to a Benedictine community in Tucson where they have established a shelter for refugees and asylum seekers.

A second important rule is the Benedictine vow of stability. Benedictines promise that they will remain with their community when times are hard, or when they find themselves in disagreement or in conflict with another person. You don't walk away. Sister Karen Joseph, the presenter, referred to this as "staying at the table." This vow of stability is the basis of trust. We know this too. You can't say hard things, you can't engage in the work of relationships if you don't trust that the other person or people will hang in there with you, physically as well as emotionally. You need to trust that you are all invested. It's the same here at First Parish - We don't ask for a vow of stability, but we do have that same expectation – that we are here to learn and grow and that involves sticking it out and talking things through when that is necessary. Community isn't community if it only exists for the happy and easy times.

And the third rule of community is that it only becomes strong when we spend time together. At WTbG our community is formed by studying, worshipping, eating, and hanging out together. At First Parish we also form community by worshipping together, working together, sharing meals, and spending time in smaller groups which allow for the sharing of our stories and our hearts. This can happen at the table over potluck suppers and lunches but also in small groups. The Fididdlers have those bonds thanks to their weekly meetings. Last winter's Brene Brown group strengthened those bonds of community as did the "What is the Bible?" group which met monthly for a year and a half. What other small groups might we form to bring us together and allow us to share our stories? At WTbG we have no choice about participating in a small group. How could we encourage everyone here to participate in one?

Perhaps some of the practices I learned about in session two last May might offer some small group themes. At that retreat on the practices of the spiritual life we learned how to cultivate silence. Silence can be scary. It can bring up thoughts and feelings we don't want to look at. Some of us have been punished by the silent treatment. So for many of us, how to experience silence as nourishing and healing is something we have to learn. As the Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote, "Teach me to go to the country beyond words, beyond names." And we do have to teach one another to journey there and accompany one another on our journeys there because our spirits yearn for silence, especially today when there is almost constant noise and stimulation. Sister Jennifer, the prioress of the monastery, was one of our presenters for this session. She has a calmness and stillness about her which makes you feel calm; and her words are simple and wise. Here are some of my notes from her talk on silence:

- Silence can shut us down or it can open us up to a world within and beyond us
- True silence is never uncomfortable.
- Our speech should come out of silence and flow back into silence. The problem is when our speech comes out of chatter.
- Listen to the wordless spaces between our thoughts. The inner silence occurs when the interior commentary of words stops so the spirit can breathe.
- When we go to that inner space we learn the discord between the person we want to be and the one we are.

So the focus of a spiritual practice is to cultivate the silence. Think about yoga, for those of you who practice that discipline. Yoga isn't an end in itself – the postures and flows are designed to allow your body to rest comfortably in silence. Yoga is a tool of meditation. And we did practice yoga that session, but we also drew, journaled, made collages, listened to music, drank tea in silence, meditated and practiced *lectio divina* on a painting, made prayer beads, wrote poems, and took nature walks. On our nature walk we were asked to open our senses, see, feel, hear, and smell nature, and then reflect about what some aspect of the scene was teaching us about our journey together. And then when we returned to the meeting room we each wrote a topical poem about the experience. In this form of verse the first line is a noun, the second line is two adjectives, the third line three verbs, the fourth line a 4-word phrase, and the fifth line a noun that repeats the idea of the first line in a new way. Here's mine, inspired by one of the beech trees from which the town gets its name:

Tree trunk  
sturdy, rooted,  
branching, reaching, feeding,  
necessary for leafy branches  
Foundation

On the final day we talked about the practice of forgiveness. For if silence brings up uncomfortable feelings of anger, regret, and grief, we often need to forgive another or forgive ourselves in order to live more fully. Here is the nightly practice Sister Jennifer offered of receive, review, reflect, repent, and resolve:

1. Receive the day with gratitude and relish moments that went well.
2. Review events that didn't go well – places where we were hurt or hurt others or wasted an opportunity to connect or offer love.

3. Reflect on feelings – what might they be indicating to you about where you need to go.
4. Repent – contemplate one of your mistakes that day and see what you need to pay attention to. And finally
5. Resolve – in what concrete ways will you live well tomorrow.

Then we went outside to practice these 5 R's. And as I walked I thought about the other presenter for that session, whom tellingly I haven't mentioned to you. Heather was a Lutheran minister from Indianapolis. Where I felt included in everything Sister Jennifer said, Heather quoted a lot from the letters of Paul and seemed to assume that we all shared her theology. She led us in making prayer beads and the supplies she had were all for rosaries, which wasn't going to work for me. But thanks to Cathie McGowan's prayer bead workshop, I knew how to make UU prayer beads and I just went ahead and did that. Also, where I felt that Sister Jennifer spoke to us from the depths of her own heart and experience, Heather felt to me not to know more about the spiritual practices than I did. It felt like she and I had read the same books on it and was speaking out of her book learning, not her heart learning. And I wanted her to talk more about non-Christian practices of meditation. So I was carrying bad feelings about her – feeling excluded, resentment of her assumptions, some ego issues that she was up there presenting something that I knew more about - and all those bubbled up as I reviewed and reflected. And somehow in the silence, I was able to see what is probably obvious to you – that Heather wasn't using scripture and theology purposely to exclude me. She probably had no idea what my being a Unitarian Universalist meant; she certainly didn't want to exclude anyone; and I had learned from her as well as from Sister Jennifer. I realized my feelings were all about me. And I came back to the room and picked up the beads to make a rosary so that I could include myself in the experience she had planned and then gave it to a friend when I came home. And at lunch, serendipitously the seat next to Heather was open and I sat down and we had a lovely conversation about being working mothers. Without that practice of forgiveness, I would have been left feeling angry and dissatisfied. Instead, I felt connected and more whole. How might we cultivate that practice and others for ourselves here at First Parish?

So those are the first two sessions. This most recent one, our topic was transitions. Our presenter Emily Cash, is a psychologist, who works with clergy individually and in groups. So she not only knows about transitions, she knows about them in the context of ministry and life in churches. Her talk was based on work by William Bridges and some of Brene Brown's, on the importance of

recognizing and leaving space around times of change. I'm not going to talk more right now about this session because I haven't had a chance to process it yet. But I have notes to myself about ways it will appear in sermons and perhaps in some small groups and how it might help me in talking with you individually about the transitions of your lives.

So back to those questions I asked you to hold onto in the beginning: What have I brought back which might feed you individually or feed us as a community or help us feed others beyond these walls? What made you think: "I want that in my life!" Or "We need to do that here!" ? Would anyone like to share your thoughts?

*Suggestions were for:*

*Story Telling*

*More on the 5 R's*

*Welcoming through electronics*

*Sitting with difficult issues*

*Practice of empathy*

Thank you for giving me the time and the space to be part of Women Touched by Grace. May the grace that I have found there spread through our community and beyond.

Now, feeding others as we have been fed, the morning's offering for the works of this church will be given and received.



