



**“High-Grace
Factor”**
John 15: 9-17
May 17, 2009
Rev. Shelley Lavenne

Tex Sample is a grey-haired, almost retired, professor of Theology. And one of his least favourite hymns is that old one people frequently like to sing at funerals. “In the Garden.”

You likely know how it goes.

*I come to the garden alone
When the dew is still on the roses*

*And he walks with me and he talks with me
and he tells me I am his own.
And the joy we share, as I tarry there,
none other, has ever known*

Perhaps Tex Sample hasn't heard it sung as well as you do this because he calls the hymn smaltzy. Says he's heard it sung in whiny pathetic ways that slur one note into another.

So one-day in his professorship, he decided to deconstruct the hymn, to use his authority of teaching to deal it a death blow.

He called it too individualistic that there were too many “I’s” and “me” and Christianity is a faith about “We.”

He went onto criticize the theology and the melody and the feelings in the hymn and he concluded by saying: “This song was written in the first part of the twentieth century. It is one of those ‘good olde songs’ but it is neither good nor old. Banish it from your ministry and your worship services, he said.

The bell rang. The class was over. The students filed out, laughing, agreeing with him. But one student who had begun studies mid-life waited until everyone had left. Then she stood before him sternly.

She told him of the incest she'd endured from age 11 until she was 16. About how after each horrid ordeal she could go outside and sing “I go to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses...and he walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own.’ If it had not been for that song and for Jesus walking with me, I would never have made it through that absolutely awful time.”

“Don't you ever, ever, ever make fun of that song in my presence again.” With that, she walked out the door.”

Tex Sample has never made fun of “in the Garden Again. And when he is in worship and that song is sung, he sings it with that woman in mind.¹

¹ Sample, *Earthy Mysticism: Spirituality for unspiritual people*. Pp. 77-81 Abingdon Press, 2008

Last weekend Joel and I were leading a workshop in another church. We'd just finished up a pretty good day of looking at the wider mission of the church, the information on demographics of their community, the opportunities for wider mission.

When from the back, a man raises his hand. He says how much he doesn't like the new hymnbook, More Voices. Why can't we sing the old ones like Amazing Grace. Now that's a hymn that has lots of meaning.

I listen to this man describe his dislike for new hymns and I'm thinking "Oh no. We've just been talking about the wider mission of the Church and we're going to get side-tracked by an inner church dispute on old and new hymns. I've forgotten all about this story from Tex that I'd read months earlier.

So I got side tracked. I bragged about this church. 'Don't you have More Voices in your congregation?' No, they tell me. The choir does. But the congregation doesn't.

'Oh,' I said. 'Well, we use it all the time because of the initiative of two people in our congregation. One gave a donation and another handed over their VISA number to cover the cost of the rest of the books.'

'Don't like it,' the man says. 'The congregation doesn't sing to those tunes. You can tell the difference,' he says.

I see 85 year old Helen. She's friend who has come from a near by town to spend the day with us and sit in on the workshop. I remember a newer hymn that Helen loves and that I can't stand. So I name that hymn and that difference. I also say, I will sing that hymn – not because I like it but because I know it's meaningful to someone else.

And isn't that being the Church? We will sing hymns that speak to our experience. We will also sing of her songs, knowing that for someone else, they have meaning.

I think it's all about grace, isn't it. We need Grace in the Church. If we don't have grace, we don't have anything, really.

I thought this man was getting off topic. But he actually got us back on topic. If the mission of the Church isn't about Grace, then we have nothing. The Church is to be about Grace. Loving, Accepting, forgiving.

Our Reading from John's Gospel says:

9 *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10* *If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11* *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12* *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*

One of the folks attending the workshop went up to the man, concerned he'd still have issue with their worship music. And he said, I don't have an issue, now that she explained it.

And really didn't his favourite him sum it all up. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me -- that gave new life to me."

We can all feel wretched at times. But the church – as a people – remind us of our blessedness. How precious we are to God. It is a place where we know love, acceptedness, forgiveness. It is where we know grace.

It is where we practice Grace.

But with Grace, there also comes responsibility. "Now remain in my love, said Jesus, "if you obey my command, you remain in my love."

I thought of this responsibility when I read this past week's newspaper about the cement truck driver who caused the death of five local people a year ago last Christmas.

Judge Bruce Fraser found the driver guilty of five counts of criminal negligence and five counts of manslaughter. He outlined the responsibilities the driver had which he'd ignored. The driver chose to drive aggressively and dangerously without concern for people properly stopped at an intersection. He was also driving a cement truck that is 10 times the size, strength and weight of the average vehicle on the road. Most over vehicles are at its mercy if it runs them down.²

The laws of our land are rotted in Scripture. There are consequences to our actions when we chose not to be respectful of others.

"Now remain in my love, said Jesus, "if you obey my commandments, you remain in my love."

If we are choosing to remain in God's love, then we are mindful of choosing actions, ways that are respectful and caring of others in our path.

This is our mission as a Church. To be a grace-filled people. So we will continue to pray for the driver, his family, those affected by this accident and ourselves.

I grew up in a church with a high grace factor. There was this choir that would sing. They would get up to sing their anthem that they had practiced on Thursday night. And they would not necessarily hit those high notes. As a teenager who was growing up seeing the perfection on TV, I'd grimace. But always afterwards, someone would say, "Didn't they choir sing beautifully today?" Or they would say, "I think the choir quite out did itself today."

The choir sung for the glory of God. The people in the congregation recognized that.

I am thankful to God that this is a church operating on a high grace factor. And may that continue to be our key to our mission as a congregation. AMEN.

² "Driver guilty of manslaughter" Western Wheel, p. 1 May 13, 2009.