

Redeeming Grace
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
December 16, 2018 (8:30)

John 1:1-18

Many years ago there lived a young and gifted woman called Marguerite who received a vision in which God spoke to her as a dear friend. In this conversation, God asked that Marguerite dedicate her life to the task of translating and distributing the Bible throughout her country.

Now, at this time the printing press had only recently been invented, and the only Bibles to be found were written in Latin and kept under lock and key within churches. Clergy, you see, were the only ones educated enough to read it, and certainly not a poor peasant girl like Marguerite.

There would be many challenges in the way of this girl, who hailed from a poor farming village on the outskirts of the city. First, she needed to raise a vast sum of money to purchase the necessary printing equipment. Next, she needed to rent a building to house the expensive equipment, and finally she needed to hire scholars with the ability to translate the Latin verses into the country's common tongue.¹

The impossibility of the task did not seem to sway Marguerite in the least. After receiving her vision, Marguerite sold the few items she possessed and left the village to live on the streets of the city, begging for the money that was required and dedicating herself to any work that was available in order to raise the necessary funds.

Raising the money proved to be a long and difficult task, for a while there were a few who gave generously. Most only gave a little, if they could afford to contribute anything at all. Furthermore, choosing to live on the streets involved great personal sacrifice. Marguerite never knew where her next meal might come from, or where she might safely lay down her head at night.

¹¹ Peter Rollins, an author and theologian, gives us this Parable called "Translating the Word (Adapted from a Buddhist Parable)" in his book *The Orthodox Heretic*.

Gradually, over the next fifteen years, her funds began to accumulate until she reached her goal.

Shortly before the plans for the printing press could be set in motion, a massive flood devastated a nearby town, destroying many people's homes and livelihood. When the news reached Marguerite, she gathered up what she had raised and spent it on food and basic provisions for the displaced and building materials for those rebuilding lost homes.

Eventually, the town began to recover from the natural disaster that had befallen it and so Marguerite left and returned to the city in order to start over again, all the while remembering the vision that God had planted deep in her heart.

Many more years passed, exacting their heavy toll on Marguerite. But now there were now many who had been touched by her love and dedication and the money began to accumulate once again.

But after nine more years, disaster struck again. This time a plague descended upon the city, stealing the lives of thousands and leaving many children without family or support. By now Marguerite was tired and very ill, yet without hesitation she used the money she had been collected to buy medicine for the sick, homes for the orphaned, and land where the dead could be buried safely.

Not once did she forget the vision that God had imparted to her as a young girl. The severity of the plague required that she set her sacred call to one side in order to help. Only when the shadow of the disease had lifted did she once again take to the streets, driven by her desire to translate the Word of God and distribute it among the people.

Finally, shortly before her death, Marguerite was able to gather together the money required for the printing press, the building, and the translators. She lived just long enough to see the first Bibles printed and distributed. It is

said to this day that Marguerite had actually accomplished her task of translating and distributing the Word of God three times during her life rather than simply once—the first two being more beautiful and radiant and act than the last.

You see, the first two times Marguerite translated the Word of God not by printing the Bible, but by living out the values Jesus held.

Jesus was about healing the sick, helping the poor, standing with the outcast, arguing and pleading with the hard-of-heart to be their brother and sister's keeper. He was about love of God with our whole heart, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

I like the Bible. I think it's divinely inspired. I spend time in it trying to figure out what lessons I can learn and how best to teach, preach, and live out these stories with you. But the Bible isn't the Word. Jesus is the Word.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. ([John 1:1](#), [5](#), [14](#))

That's the birth narrative according to John: no angels or shepherds, stars or stables, as in the Gospel of Luke; no naming of 42 generations of who begat whom, or of the Wise men from afar, as in Matthew. There are no Christmas trees, Santa Clauses, Grinches, or charge cards; no ornaments or candles or tinsel.

We see here none of the layers that have been gathered around the birth of the Christ child over the centuries. Instead, there's only this... In Jesus, whom we call "the Christ", the divine became human, dwelt among us, and called us to a grace-filled life.

That was a revolutionary idea for its time. The perfection of heaven embodied on earth because God willed it. The author of the Gospel wanted there to be no mistake: The Word became flesh; God became human; love wins; light triumphed over darkness. And that light can't be put out.

In our United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith we say "In Jesus Christ, the Man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole world to its Creator."

That's the meaning of Christ as John has written it. And that's the meaning of Christmas for us:

- Never again can it be as though God were distant and separate.
- Never again will there be an impassable chasm between the divine and the human.
- Never again will sin and brokenness be the final word.

In becoming one of us, God chose to live as we live, rejoice as we rejoice, suffer as we suffer, die as we die. And when we can't comprehend the fullness of God as our Creator, we can begin to understand Christ as our Brother. We are an incarnation, too.

And as an incarnation, we become Good News. Good News that gives the hungry food, clothes the shivering, gives hope to the despairing, comforts those who mourn, gives community to the lonely, speaks out against injustice, and reaches the poor and oppressed. With love over all. Redeeming grace.

My hope is that you will be the reason someone smiles today, or sees a way out of no way.

My hope for you is to find grace and peace, challenge and comfort, both in the pages of our sacred stories and in the loving arms of God, who sent Jesus to us, who has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us... The word who was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Word without end, for God is still speaking, Amen.