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A Window into Grace

By The Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

I learned much of what I have come to understand about grace through my experience with a 1995 Honda Accord. It wasn't my first car (that was a mighty Mercury Lynx), but it was my first *new* car. It smelled so good! It was fresh and clean, and it just screamed, "Drive me!"

Some early incidents knocked some of the luster off the car pretty quickly, though. There was the time when I took a member of the youth group with me to pick up pancake batter that IHOP was donating for our Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper. He and I put the vat of pancake batter in the trunk and headed back to the church. As we rounded a corner there was a dull thud in the rear, but I didn't think too much of it.

When we opened the trunk, it was flooded with pancake batter. That youth had the boldness to say, "Is it supposed to look like this?" We did the best we could to get the batter out, but for a while when I would park the Accord somewhere, the batter would ooze out of the trunk's drainage holes and make little pancakes on the ground. And then, on a hot, humid day, after the

car had been in the sun for a good, long while and the batter had time to “cure” some more, it offered quite an aroma.

Even worse, I had leased this car and had long-since blown past the mileage limit. I knew that each additional mile I drove would result in an excess mileage fee when I returned the car at the end of the lease. Driving it just no longer seemed quite as fun.

And then the car was stolen. It was the weekend Patty and I had gotten engaged, and we had gone into Manhattan with some friends, parking near South Street Seaport. When we came back to get in the car to head home, it was nowhere to be found. We walked to the nearest police station and reported the theft. We walked around all of the adjacent streets, just to make sure we hadn’t missed it, and the feeling of violation started to sink in. Someone had eyed my car, decided they wanted it, and simply helped themselves to it. I was seething.

And then I remembered the excess mileage fee. That entire debt I was facing was gone – wiped away forever! To top it off, the insurance company sent me a check for \$1,200, as some compensation towards the loss! And I thought, “This is grace!” It was pure, unmerited, unexpected relief – a fresh start, a wiping of the slate.

And, I have to admit, on the next hot, humid day I took some secret delight in the experience the thieves must have been having with the old pancake batter.

God’s grace is like my experience with the Honda Accord. God doesn’t approach us only from a posture of righteous judgment – in such case we would all be found wanting.

God doesn’t give us what we deserve, thank God, but tempers the Divine justice with mercy and grace. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

I’m pretty sure all of us have some areas of our lives where we are over the mileage limit, and we might even have some sour pancake batter in the

trunk. Yet God comes to us first, loves us, and offers us grace, forgiveness, and a fresh start.

I try to be attentive to moments of grace – those times when I know I deserve very little, if anything at all, and some sort of blessing happens. These could be times when I have been forgiven for something, or when a complete stranger says something which turns out to be life-giving.

As we begin to emerge from this pandemic, a bit like cicadas coming out of the ground, I think there will be many opportunities to feel and experience grace, both from God and from our sisters and brothers. Following this once-in-a-lifetime experience (God willing), we will likely need to offer up what we have done and what we have left undone, how we have grown, where we have proceeded courageously, and where we have shrunk back in fear. Most of us could probably tick all of those boxes. Let's be on the lookout for grace!

I believe St. Paul came to understand grace on the deepest of levels. He was instrumental in the persecution of the Church before his conversion, even holding the coats of those who were stoning St. Stephen. Yet, Paul experienced deep transformation and generous helpings of God's grace. Paul said:

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:10-14).

Brother Curtis Almquist, an Episcopal monk of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, often speaks of beginning each new day with this simple prayer of thanks, a prayer acknowledging grace: “I have been given a new day, yet another day.” Indeed.