

THE MACHINERY OF GRACE

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
March 12, 2017

The sanctuary at All Souls is one of my favorite places in the world. I love how light comes through these capacious windows and music resounds in these soaring vaults. I love the people who gather here — curious, passionate, visionary souls — and the steady rhythm that marks the ebb and flow of our gathering. I have fond memories of this place: my daughter Zoë was dedicated in this chancel, and my wife Holly and I were married here.

The character of this space, however, is determined as much by what is absent as by what is present. It has always struck me as ironic that we construct buildings by putting walls around emptiness and a roof over open space. Rather than eliminating the space, the walls and roof give purpose to the emptiness. Architecture, after all, is about the shape of the void and the texture at the edge of what is not here.

I am reminded of the enigmatic verse that opens the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

To say that a formless void was present in the beginning may seem like another way of saying there was nothing. But the void was charged with possibility. It was an openness that awaited fulfillment, a longing that awaited satisfaction. In the beginning, the universe was filled only with the potential of all that it might become.

This space we call a sanctuary has much the same character. It is a void charged with possibility. For this reason, it has not been filled with apartments for us to live in or boxes for storing our stuff. It is not a roadway for buses or a subway for trains or a storage tank for wheat or water. This is a sanctuary: a place that is *sanctus* — the Latin word meaning holy. What makes this place holy is, in part, what is not present. The absence of the noise and bustle of everyday life returns each of us to places of possibility within our own lives, where openness awaits fulfillment and longing awaits satisfaction.

All Souls was founded in 1819, but the cornerstone of this building — our fourth — was laid in 1931. The Twenties had finished roaring, the stock market had crashed, and the long slump into what would become the Great Depression had begun. The times demanded a sanctuary that conveyed a sense of strength and permanence.

The architectural style of this building is rooted in the classical design principles of ancient Rome, as developed in this country during the period from about 1700 to the start of the Revolutionary War. This period coincided with the reigns in England of Kings George I, II, and III — hence the designation “Georgian style.” Formal and

dignified, with its steady symmetry and balanced proportions, this sanctuary bounds the void with reassuring calm. In various subtle ways, the design elements — fanlight windows, Ionic columns, globe finials, and raking cornices — contribute to the sense of serenity and comfort. When I walk into this space on a Sunday morning, I feel not so much emptiness as an invitation.

But an invitation to what? Why would someone who had never done so before walk into this sanctuary on an otherwise-unremarkable Sunday morning in 1932, or 1974, or 2017? Indeed, for nearly two centuries, people have been entering All Souls for the first time. Why? What are they looking for? What are we looking for?

As many of you know, I sometimes refer to All Souls as a sanctuary for seekers. Given the explosive growth in the seeker population today — people who identify as spiritual but not religious now make up a quarter of the US population and 40% of the millennial generation — our role as a sanctuary for seekers will be increasingly important in the years to come. But seekers have been around for a long time.

In 1970, Pete Townshend wrote and the English rock band The Who recorded a now-famous anthem titled “The Seeker.” The song begins:

I've looked under chairs
I've looked under tables
I try to find the key
To fifty million fables
They call me the Seeker
I've been searching low and high
I won't find what I'm after
Till the day I die

The song goes on to say:

I'm happy when life's good
And when it's bad, I cry
I got values
But I don't know how or why

The final verse reads:

I'm looking for me!
You're looking for you!
We're looking at each other
And we don't know what to do!
They call me the Seeker
I've been searching low and high

I won't find what I'm after
Till the day I die

In many ways, Townshend's seeker fits the profile of many seekers today. They're searching low and high for something, but they're not sure they'll ever find it. They've got values, but they don't know how or why. They look at the people around them and the world they've inherited, and they don't know what to do. They call themselves seekers.

I was reminded of Townshend's song when I came across the feature in today's *New York Times Magazine* about "25 Songs That Tell Us Where Music Is Going." The journalist Jason Parham writes the article about song number 23, "Siegfried" by the rapper Frank Ocean. As some of you know, Ocean has been in the news recently, courtesy of Justin Timberlake, who made the controversial remark that Ocean should've won the Grammy for Album of the Year instead of Adele. Parham doesn't address this controversy in his article, but rather focuses on Frank Ocean's underlying motivation for his music. Parham writes:

Five years ago, on a sticky July afternoon, I stood in the kitchen of a friend's apartment, face jammed to an iridescent iPhone screen, poring over Frank Ocean's "coming out letter." What seemed radical then now feels so achingly true to Ocean's uncategorizable spirit: He'd posted a screen shot of a TextEdit file to his personal Tumblr page and, in the echo of a Lucille Clifton or Countee Cullen poem, detailed his summers-long relationship with another man, his first love. Five years later, one passage in it has yet to unhook itself from me: "HUMAN BEINGS SPINNING ON BLACKNESS. ALL WANTING TO BE SEEN, TOUCHED, HEARD, PAID ATTENTION TO."

Parham adds, "Whether you have the emotional bandwidth to admit it or not, all of us, at some point in our volatile existence on Earth, want to be acknowledged by another human being — seen, touched, heard and paid attention to."

To be sure, Ocean's existential crisis was driven by his struggle to come to terms with his identity as a gay man, perhaps even more his identity as a gay black man, and perhaps even more his identity as a gay black rapper. Even so, the longing he expresses for an authentic place in the world and an authentic connection to another human being rings true for seekers everywhere. At some point during our existence on earth, we seek an authentic source of identity, connection, and purpose — and we seek to achieve these goals before we die, not after.

Subtleties aside, that's mostly why people have been coming to All Souls for nearly 200 years. We seek to discover who we are, where we belong, and what we stand for. We seek to heal the brokenness in our own lives and in our world. We seek caring

hands to hold us when we feel vulnerable and gentle hands to urge us on when we feel afraid. We seek to make a difference in the world — make it more truthful, more beautiful, more compassionate, and more just.

Paul Tillich, one of the best-known theologians of the Twentieth Century, describes the experience of discovering our authentic identity and of feeling deeply connected to a larger purpose as the experience of grace. Tillich describes this experience the following way:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we love, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure has become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know....’ If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience, we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed.

More than anything, we come into this sanctuary to experience grace — to discover our authentic identity and feel deeply connected to a larger purpose. As we find ourselves and our lives transformed in this way, we also discover the vision and the power to help transform our world. In this way, everything is transformed — here, in this sanctuary.

In this sense, our sanctuary and the building around it constitute what the poet Michael Donaghy once called “the machinery of grace.” In his poem titled “Machines,” Donaghy talks about the simple beauty of a harpsichord or a racer’s twelve-speed bicycle. The harpsichord is not the music, of course, nor is the bicycle the race. But the harpsichord, exquisitely built and finely tuned, is essential to the beauty of the music. And the bicycle, exquisitely engineered and finely constructed, is essential to riding in the race. Donaghy says, “So much agility, desire, and feverish care, as bicyclists and harpsichordists prove, who only by moving can balance, only by balancing move.”

This sanctuary — exquisitely designed and beautifully constructed — is essential to the experiences of grace that happen here. As the poet says, the machinery of grace requires agility, desire, and feverish care. When it comes to our sanctuary and our physical and financial infrastructure, however, we’ve not been sufficiently diligent in

past years to maintain what needs to be maintained, nor to keep moving with the changing demands of the time.

But that is now changing, as we launch our capital campaign and prepare for our third century as a congregation. We've resolved not to let this building fall into disrepair like our previous three buildings. We commit ourselves to doing our best to care for this sanctuary. Week after week, and generation after generation, people will be able to gather here to experience grace — to discover an authentic identity and feel deeply connected to a larger purpose. Because of our care and our commitment, this will remain a sanctuary for seekers.

I don't know why you entered this sanctuary for the first time, but I know there are countless others who feel the same longing. I don't know how you would express what you found here, but I know others would express the same satisfaction. This is our opportunity to expand our circle of compassion, to extend our mission beyond our own needs and desires.

By helping transform lives, we can help transform the world — make it more truthful, more beautiful, more compassionate, and more just. I hope you will join me in this essential endeavor.