

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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A Good Word for Anne Stuck
Russ Dean, March 24, 2013

In an ironic paraphrase of the powerful words of Jesus, the southern novelist, Flannery O'Connor, got it right when she said, "*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you... odd.*" I hope none of Anne Stuck's friends or family will be offended when I say that I loved Anne Stuck... because she was odd. Her son, Chris, told me what he called an "irrefutable" truth about his mother. "Most of us are followers. My mother, against all odds, lived life almost entirely on her own terms. She did it, and she made it look natural." I cannot think of a better compliment from one's own son – and, living life on your own terms, almost always, inevitably, makes one a bit odd. Thanks be to God, for one who did not conform to the ways of this world, who was not beckoned by the sirens of American individualism and materialism, but who "marched to the beat of her own drummer," not standing in a defiant and selfish "I did it my way,"¹ but for the pursuit of truth and as one woman standing as best she knew how for the betterment of all. Most people stand for themselves and that, ironically, makes them one of the crowd. Anne stood for the poor and the dispossessed, the outcasts, the mentally ill and incapacitated, the *least of these* as Jesus said it, and in doing so, she often found herself alone. You know, the odd woman out.

¹ Because Anne was so well-read, she frequently quoted phrases from literature, or alluded to authors or their work. I have used these quotes, made famous by Thoreau and Sinatra deliberately. The actual quotation from Thoreau's *Walden*, is: "If a man loses pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured, or far away."

Anne was born in Chicago, but from my conversations with her she considered herself European. She lived her early life there, completing high school in Paris before returning to Black Mountain where she was influenced by an experimental approach to learning that was raising eyebrows in Appalachia around 1940. Her work with the German scholar, Dr. Paul Radin, inspired her lifelong interest in anthropology and languages of Native Americans. Anne excelled in linguistic studies, eventually becoming fluent in seven languages, and graduating Summa Cum Laude. She became a teacher, of course. Passing along her love of learning to high school and college students, and then in retirement through book clubs and small gatherings of friends who would come to her house to study a video course and have dialogue. She never ceased her reading or engaging a critical inquiry with her material.

I am, personally, deeply grateful for Anne's intellect and her keen ability to discern and dissect an argument.² I have spent many hours with her, through theological conversation with that old "Humility Club," and through a somewhat extensive correspondence we maintained through email. She would frequently comment on a sermon, most often writing to correct something I had said, to offer her criticism, or a contrasting opinion. But always with love. And she often signed off in some foreign tongue... *shalom*... *ainsi-soit-il*... *me agape*... Not to impress me, nor because she thought I understood those words (surely she did not!), but because she simply thought in the colors of language, and sometimes English, with only 600,000 words,

² In our memorial tribute many of Anne's friends spoke of her, and no one failed so say, in one way or another, "Anne was smart." Her intellect was essential to whom she was, and she was one of the best-read people any of us has known. The intellectual pursuit and her intellectual capacity, however, were also a source of great tension and frustration for her – because Anne Stuck thought of herself as "one of the people." She was deeply committed to community and longed for a society with no "haves and have nots," with no distinctions of race or privilege, with no hierarchies – and being "smart" set her apart from the masses, to whom she was so committed. I think this paradox was a source of great frustration for her, and I mention it only as a compliment to her. She could not "cease from her exploration" (to quote Eliot!), yet that exploration inevitably distanced her to some degree from friends and neighbors and strangers – the masses – with whom she was so determined to be one.

still did not allow just the right nuance. I loved Anne's letters and treasure all the ones that I have saved over the years.

Apparently, however, language was not Anne's only expertise. She loved to be outdoors, and she was a sports enthusiast. Three years running she was Connecticut's Archery Field Trial Champion, and in a spectacular finish she defeated a male competitor to become the overall New England champ. As Chris tells the story, her opponent's final shot was a dead bulls eye... so little "Anne Get Your Gun" did the only thing possible to take the title from him – she split his arrow down the middle! Even in her 80s she was riding the kids' scooters in the driveway, and ten years ago, on a visit to the "Bottomless Pools" near Lake Lure, the family found the gate locked... so Anne climbed over and jumped in. "Granny" told the grandchildren she wasn't coming back later; they could follow if they wanted to!

Anne loved the beauty of nature, and appreciated all life. The old expression, "she wouldn't hurt a fly" was coined just for her. When a honeybee landed on her sandwich, she shooed it away, gently. She had utmost respect for life, in all its varied forms. There was not a malicious bone in her body. But don't misunderstand that to mean that Anne Stuck was weak. Her original cancer diagnosis was over 40 years ago, and she was given only a 5% chance of survival. Forty years ago! When I talked with her several days before she breathed her last, she sounded like the Anne that I have argued with, defended myself against, and learned from, all these years.

It was an honor to have Anne Stuck as a member of our congregation. When she began visiting here a decade ago, she soon thereafter invited us to lunch. After a sandwich on the patio on a beautiful spring day, Anne told us that she was enjoying Park Road, and she offered some

fine accolades for the preaching, but she said, “Don’t expect me to join.” She went on to say that she didn’t really consider herself “Christian,” in the usual, traditional sense. She was a student of truth, in whatever form it may be presented, a citizen of the global community – she was not a Baptist! A couple of months later, I was away on a Sunday morning, and when I called to get Amy’s report on worship at Park Road, she said, “Well... you will never guess who joined the church today!” Every Baptist minister needs at least a few members who are Christian – in the unusual, non-traditional sense – members with a universal vision and a deep respect for truth in all its expressions. Her vision has made us a better people. Her voice has made me a better pastor.

There are several things I will always remember about Anne. When she would exit the sanctuary door on Sundays, everyone else stopping to hug our necks, Anne would hurry past, extending a hand, which was intended for a warm touch, but just as much intended as a polite stiff-arm against the incursion of a too-southern good bye. Anne was not a hugger! But one day on Londonderry, as I finished the conversation and was heading out the back door, she stopped me in my tracks. I should have written the words, because they were quintessential Anne, but she said something like, “Thank you for your visit. And if you should care to, I would afford you the briefest of a southern affection.” And she leaned forward and opened her arms, and I got my one and only hug from Anne that day!

We had had long, deep conversations about all things theological, including prayer. What it does and what it doesn’t do... for God... for the one being prayed for... for the one doing the praying. We both had admitted our own hint of cynicism, skepticism about the way prayer is

often treated, but at the end of each of my visits, she would remind me quietly, “I still do pray, and if you care to, I would be glad to have you pray with me now.”

But perhaps my favorite memory of Anne came from the construction of our new Community Center. I speak of the integrity and character at her center. I knew that Anne was not a proponent of more building on our campus. Churches and schools and institutions of all kinds were too given to the complex of needing to spend money on facilities – when there are children dying in the world. To my knowledge she is the only person to have voted “No” in a voice-vote on construction. She had the kind of strength that some nay-sayers will not muster, at least out loud. Not in a church business meeting.

Sometime the next year our Financial Administrator told me that he’d had a visit from Anne. His message was remarkable. She was going on a cruise, he said, and she had brought by written proof of her instructions that should she die before returning to Park Road, her pledge to the community center should be paid in full. Her pledge to the building that she did not support! Anne believed in, and understood what it meant to be a part of a community. Even if you don’t agree with everything – you’re still a part of the community. I will forever be grateful for that example. She was always teaching...

I have enjoyed re-reading some of the correspondence that I have filed over the years. If you would allow me, I would like to read an email entitled, “Forgiveness and Grace,” dated March 3, 2005. This email speaks to me so completely about whom she was... her love of language... her deep, discerning theology... and an unusual, can I call it “odd,” but sustaining faith...

To All HC, especially to ladies and gentlemen of the cloth:

I have much unease about forgiveness. It has about it a whiff of selfishness. Something is remitted, given back and, in its earliest sense, transacted – a mercantilistic action. Forgive, in its Anglo-Saxon form, meant to remit. The Latin survives in the English remit (mitto, mittere, missi, missus – send), though the Romans used veniam dare from venia, forgiveness, a cognate of venal. The Greek form, aphienia (translit.), I've taken from my United Bible Societies' "The Greek New testament," Luke 5:24. My Liddell & Scott's Lexicon translates the infinite exactly the same as what we have for the AS. I've not checked earlier forms, but all points to some proto-Indo-European origin which is not just pedantry (I do wish more people would see the treasures buried in Language), but also signifies a traditional view of forgiveness over millennia not quite of the Hallmark greeting card variety.

For me, as for many others, the Jesus transaction is cruel and selfish. It is not, for us, an Unselfish Atonement. It adheres to the essential meaning of forgiveness. However, in orthodox Christian terms: If I forgive, I give back what? And the benefit is what? An overlooking? A "Well, no big deal?" If it is a big deal, what am I really remitting? If I am forgiven by God is that not a free pass at someone else's expense – blood money? Of course, the Calvinist doesn't know for sure if he/she got a free pass so that would keep one on one's toes out of fear.

What I think I understand if GRACE. That is a pure clear beam of light from God, a donum superadditum and prevenient grace for which no moral sifting, no seeking something, no ransoms, no redeeming – just purification. The purity of fire in which the ancient Persians saw God.

Forgiveness and Grace are not synonymous and I need to think a lot more about it. And I would be very grateful for help in that. afs

There you have it. GRACE is all. "A pure clear beam of light from God."

And she would have been grateful for me to have helped her to understand. I don't think so!

For Anne Stuck, my wonderful and wonderfully-odd friend, thanks be to God!