

***Grace, Love, and Fellowship***  
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There was once a rancher whose cows stopped producing milk. He figured someone must be milking the cows, stealing the milk. He decided to set a trap for the milk thief; and so one night he remained in hiding waiting to catch the culprit.

Instead of a neighbor coming along to milk his cows, the rancher saw the most incredible sight. He saw a woman riding on a moonbeam, descending to the earth with a pail. Sure enough, she filled her large pail with milk from some of the cows, and then just as she was about to catch a moonbeam back to the heavens, he grabbed her. Well, up close, he noticed that she was incredibly beautiful and so instead of turning her in to the local authorities, he decided to bargain with her. If she would marry him, he wouldn't make a fuss about the milk. The woman agreed, but asked that he allow her to return home to give her family the last pail of milk and to say goodbye. She promised she would return the next night. The bargain was made and the woman ascended back into the heavens.

The next night, the man was waiting for his intended to return. Finally, he saw her descending on a moonbeam, just as before, but instead of carrying a milk pail, she was carrying a trunk. She approached the rancher and said, "I'm here to keep my promise but now I need you to promise me something. My most prized possessions are in this trunk. I want you to promise that you will never open it." The rancher agreed, and off they went to live as a new family.

A few weeks went by and the rancher started thinking about that trunk though. And he couldn't stand that his wife was keeping secrets from him. Whatever was in that trunk he has a right to know about (he reasoned). So, one day, when his wife was away, he went up to her special trunk, opened it up, and peered inside. To his amazement, it was empty! The trunk had nothing in it! He was furious; what kind of game was his moon bride playing?

Of course, he decided to confront her. When she came home he pounced on her and said, "I'm very angry with you. You told me that trunk of yours was filled with your most prized possessions, but when I looked in it, it was empty. Why didn't you want me to look inside an empty box?!"

At once, his wife turned on her heels, picked up her trunk, and started walking out the door. She was going to wait until nightfall and then catch a moonbeam back to her heavenly home. The rancher demanded, "Where do you think you're going?" She answered, "I'm leaving you — and not because you broke your promise to never look inside my trunk."

"Then why?" the confused rancher asked. "Because," she answered, "that trunk contains all my dreams and when you looked inside it, you didn't see them; you thought the trunk was empty. I could never stay with a man who can't see my fondest hopes and dreams." And that is the story of my Aunt Gladys' first marriage.

The story actually comes from West Africa, and it teaches something very important about relationships. Right relationship, that is, the *righteous* relationship, is one of mutuality — power with, not power over. All parties enter into the relationship freely, without coercion or threat.

In the story of the moon-maid and her rancher husband, she was stealing from him; he captured her. The relationship wasn't based on mutual trust or positive regard. Of course she didn't trust him with her dreams; naturally, he didn't seem them when they were in front of him. Their relationship was one of fear and obligation...it wasn't healthy. It wasn't mutual. It wasn't life giving. It couldn't last.

Strangely, that's the very sort of relationship many people have with God. They feel trapped by God. They had better give lip service to God or God will turn them over to punishment, perhaps forever. And so they claim to worship or love God, when in reality they are using religion like fire-insurance...just trying to believe whatever will keep God from tossing them away like a used tea bag.

That arrangement has benefited institutional religion. It has given those who claim to speak for God power over those who are desperate for divine approval. It has infantilized the faithful and excluded those whose dignity would not allow them to submit to such a system. But there is another way to relate to God.

We begin each Sunday with this prayer of St. Paul's: "*May the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the unity of spirit be with you all.*" Grace, love, and unity or communion or fellowship — those are the attributes of a holy relationship with the divine. Not fearful obedience: Not legalistic rules, but Grace. Love. Fellowship. That's what God is offering us. We aren't being threatened into a dysfunctional relationship of fear; we are being invited into a life-giving relationship of unconditional love. Grace. Love. Fellowship — that's the Christian witness, the Christian message, the Christian hope.

Today's gospel message, the so-called Great Commission, affirms this truth. What is a disciple? It's a student and a student asks questions, explores, makes mistakes. A student takes risks in pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. A good student can't be paralyzed by fear, nor can she simply regurgitate formulaic answers. A student is a seeker, a questioner, one who trusts the process and joyfully becomes part of it. Go therefore and make disciples of all kinds of people.

What is baptism? It's a rite of initiation. It symbolizes full inclusion. It is how we formally welcome people into the Christian community. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...welcoming them into life-giving relationship. And do it in the name of the loving God, the gracious Christ, and the relationship building Spirit. Go therefore and make questioning students, welcoming them in the name of grace, love, and fellowship.

Why do we offer *Spirit & Truth* magazine? Why do we offer courses through Light University? Why do we offer worship in Fort Lauderdale, and in Jamaica, and soon in Miami? Why do we reach out to literally thousands of people each month on the worldwide web? Why do we collect food for people who need a hand? Why do we offer progressive, positive, practical spirituality to as many people as possible in as many ways as possible? We are just trying to help people be students of life, and we are welcoming them into the joy of community in the name of Grace, Love, and Fellowship. This is, after all, the Great Commission. And this is the Good News. Amen.

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**I give thanks for grace equal to every need.  
I give thanks for the all-inclusive love of God.  
I give thanks for the joy of right relationship.  
Grace, Love, and Fellowship now bless my life.  
Divine Light shines through me...  
To heal me and my world.  
And so it is!**

Recall these words of Robert Holden: "Every day you walk out of the front door of your home, either into a world of love or a world of fear, depending on which story you most believe in. You choose the story."