

SIGNS OF GRACE

In the 1960s, there was no better store for a child than Ben Franklin. It was a five-and-dime back when kids really could spend a nickel or a dime for anything we wanted.

I remember in Greenfield, the Ben Franklin had a wonderful aisle full of penny candy. And whenever we kids would go into the store, Mom would give each of us a nickel, dime or sometimes a whole quarter to go get whatever we wanted. Sometimes we'd buy a candy bar for 15 cents, but more often we'd pick and choose up to 15 pieces of candy. Rarely would we spend an entire quarter on candy – after all, that would result in a stomachache and a lecture. But we'd get our money's worth, and still have change for our piggy banks when we got home.

Except when I was about 6, on my way to the candy aisle, I noticed something in the notions aisle. It was a small bottle of Jergen's hand lotion. My mother loved Jergen's hand lotion. They've changed the formula, but even today's lotion with its almond-cherry scent reminds me of Mom back when she had bouffant hair.

And on that day, I didn't want to buy any candy. What I wanted more than anything else was to buy my Mom that little bottle of Jergen's hand lotion. It wasn't Mom's birthday; it wasn't Christmas or Mother's Day. But suddenly, I was just seized with this desire to show Mom my love for her. The Jergen's was priced 25 cents, and I had a quarter in my hand, so I picked up the bottle, headed to the register, and handed the clerk the bottle and the quarter.

Except when she rang it up, she said, "That will be 26 cents." No, I told her, the bottle is only 25 cents. Yes, she said, but proceeded to give me a lesson on something called sales tax.

At the time, the Indiana sales tax was 4 percent. As long as I had spent 24 cents or less on something, there hadn't been enough for the sales tax to kick in. But now for a sale of 25 cents, there was a one cent tax, and I was a penny shy of making my purchase.

There was no kind person standing nearby who dug a penny out of their pocket. And this was LONG before the “need a penny, take a penny” containers were available. So I was stuck.

To buy the Jergen’s, I needed a penny. And for me to get a penny, I needed to go to my mother.

And the thought just killed me. After all, this was supposed to be a gift for Mom. Since she’d given me a quarter, it didn’t seem likely I could ask for another penny without her asking why I needed it. And it seemed silly to ask her to help pay for her own present.

But the only way I’d be able to buy the present was with her penny. And it crossed my mind that this clerk was just trying to cheat me out of a penny by making up a story about taxes. Mom would know, so I went to her and explained my dilemma.

In hindsight, Mom could have told me many things. She could have told me she didn’t need the Jergen’s, which was true – I’m sure she had a full-sized bottle back home on the counter. She could have told me, “Oh, honey, just spend the quarter on yourself.”

But to her credit, Mom did neither. She simply reached in her pocket and pulled out a penny and gave it to me. And I went back up to the clerk, finished my purchase, and gave the hand lotion to my Mom.

I don’t remember what I gave to Mom for Christmas or Mother’s Day or her birthday when I was 6 years old. But I remember that bottle of Jergen’s. And when I mentioned it to my Mom a few years ago, she remembered it, too.

This day, we will celebrate baptism and communion, the two sacraments we observe as United Methodists. What is a sacrament? We often say a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace. But when people then ask me what grace is, I think of that story I just told you.

Grace is when God makes up the difference between what we can pay and what we owe. Without grace, we'd all be looking at a balance due that we cannot earn or make. But when we turn to God, it is a balance God willingly pays for us.

And we are reminded of that willingness twice this morning in the act of pouring. During baptism, we pour water into the font. During communion, we pour the juice into the chalice.

These acts are like Mom's penny. They are visible reminders of how freely God pours His grace upon us even though there is nothing we have done to earn that grace or merit God's favor.

That's why we baptize infants. Baptism is our witness to the fact that there is no time in our lives that we are outside of God's grace. Even before we can acknowledge God, God is at work in our lives.

Likewise, God doesn't wait until we're perfect to extend His grace. When Jesus was sharing the Last Supper with his first disciples, he didn't just give the bread and wine to those who were perfect, because it would have been a meal for one. Rather, he gave the elements to all of them – the one who would deny him, the one who would betray him, and the ones that would desert him. And he told them in the future, whenever they took the bread and wine, they should do so in remembrance of him: in remembrance of the grace given to them and to us.

Whether we are receiving baptism or communion, we are doing exactly that: receiving. God is the one who gives, and gives abundantly. And we are to receive with all the humility, innocence and dependence of a child, as Jesus told the disciples they must do.

But above all, may we like children go to God in trust – as I did going to my mother for a penny – knowing not only that God is the one who can make up the difference, but also that God loves us as His children and is delighted when we ask.