

“Amazing Grace”

Luke 15:11-32 • Ephesians 2:1-10

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • April 29, 2018

In 1772, an Anglican clergyman in the little town of Olney, England, wrote the words to a new hymn to help illustrate his sermon, something he did regularly. But these particular words changed the world. They became possibly the best-known hymn of all time.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see.”

When John Newton wrote *Amazing Grace*, he wasn’t just trying to convey his theology. He was telling his own story, the story of how God’s grace changed his life. When John Newton was young he was nurtured and taught by his mother who was a devout Christian. She read the Bible to him and prayed that he would go into the ministry when he was grown. But after she died when John was only 7, he was raised by his father who was a merchant sailor. When he was 11, John began going to sea with his father and when he was 19 he was conscripted into the Royal Navy. But John had frequent conflicts with his superiors and even deserted at one point. He finally convinced his superiors to discharge him to a slave ship.

I guess you could say that it was while working on the slave ship that Newton developed his skills at poetry and songwriting. He would come up with obscene songs to openly mock the Captain. Often the rest of the crew joined in. During this time he also renounced any faith he might have had left. John Newton was known at the time as one of the most profane men anyone had ever met. He made the other sailors blush with his language.

But God had other plans. In March, 1748, Newton was serving on the slave trading ship *Greyhound* when a violent storm came upon them and threatened to sink the ship. Newton and the other sailors pumped water out for hours. When John was too exhausted to work the pumps any longer they tied him to the help to try to steer the ship. He stayed at that post for the next 11 hours while the storm shredded

the sails and ripped wood from the side of the boat. In the desperation of the storm John Newton cried out to God for deliverance.

But he also began to recall some of the Scriptures. In particular, he remembered God’s words from Proverbs 1: “Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me.”

God did deliver them. Newton survived the storm and made it to Ireland. But the memory of calling out to God and the thought that he might be too far gone for God to save him drove him to seriously study the Scriptures. What he discovered was the same thing that you and I can discover. None of us is too far gone for God to save because we are only saved by God’s grace. Within a few years Newton gave up sailing and studied theology, eventually being ordained to the ministry, answering his mother’s prayers.

In Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul writes, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath.” It sounds like he’s describing John Newton. Maybe it sounds like he’s describing you.

But that’s not the end of the story. Paul continues, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—

by grace you have been saved.” Grace is what can change us from “children of wrath” to “God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus.” Grace is the only thing that transform us from “dead in our trespasses” to “alive together with Christ.”

So the obvious question is, “what is grace?” The short answer is that grace is God’s unmerited favor. It’s God giving to you what you absolutely don’t deserve, and not giving you what you do deserve. As verse 8 says, “it is the gift of God.” So God’s grace includes the forgiveness of our sins, but it’s much more than that. His grace is what unites us to Christ and gives us life. He does it to show his kindness toward us in Jesus and he does it to use *us* to show his kindness in Jesus to other people. That’s why Paul says, “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” God’s grace to you is never just for you.

The Greek word for grace, *charis*, actually refers both to the gift and to the thanksgiving for the gift. We will see why this is important in a moment. There’s nothing you or I can do to earn God’s grace or favor but there are things that God has given us to help us see and experience his grace. In theology we call these the “means of grace.” These would be the ways that God speaks to us so that we understand his amazing grace, which is one of the reasons we should worship regularly. It’s in worship that we engage in these means of grace: the preaching of Scripture, prayer, and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

This morning I want to talk briefly about baptism and grace. In our tradition we baptize infants while other traditions will only baptize someone who is ready to make a profession of faith. The reason we baptize infants is grace. Baptism is the sign and seal of our justification in Christ. It’s the visible symbol that “even when we were dead in our trespasses, God being rich in mercy made us alive together with Christ.” And as Paul says in Ephesians 1, “he chose us in him before the foundation of the

world.” When we baptize children, as we’ve done today, we declare publicly our faith in the great love with which God loves us; we demonstrate the immeasurable riches of God’s grace to us in Jesus. Baptism is not a response to something *we’ve* done, it’s a response to something *God* has done. That also means that baptism alone does not have the power to save us. Getting baptized does not guarantee us a spot in heaven. Only the grace of God does that. Baptism is our way of expressing that belief.

Just as John Newton had to repent of his sins and trust in Jesus for salvation, each one of us must do the same thing. This child we baptized this morning will need to learn the faith for herself. Her parents have promised to teach her and to make sure she participates in the means of grace – hearing the word of God preached, praying, and participating in the sacraments. When she is old enough she will need to submit her life to Christ, publicly professing her faith. And we have all promised to help.

Grace is an amazing thing. It can turn a foul-mouthed, insubordinate slave-trading sailor into a child of God who would go on to influence people like William Wilburforce, who was the driving force behind the abolition of slavery in England, and William Carey who pioneered foreign missions. And grace can change you, too.

John Newton continued to preach and minister until he was 80, just a few years before he died. Through the rest of his life he remained amazed by God’s grace. Shortly before his death he told some friends, “My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.” We would do well to remember those two things as well.

Amen.