

Amazing Grace

John 9:1-11

There are a number of hymns, both old and new, that I enjoy singing. All of them lift my spirits, some will even bring tears to my eyes. My all-time favorite hymn, though, is an oldie, and certainly a goodie – “Amazing Grace”. The text from today’s reading in John reminded me of the song “Amazing Grace”. You know how it goes:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me....
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now, I see.

For those of you who may not be familiar with the story behind Amazing Grace, here is a little history lesson. John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace, was a slave trader in the 1700’s. Once on a homeward journey, a great storm threatened the safety of both ship and crew. Fearing all was lost, Newton cried out, “Lord, have mercy on us.” The calming of the storm was seen by Newton as God’s grace extended to him. That was May 10, 1748.

Although he continued in the slave trade for a number of years following, as he called it, his “great deliverance”, John Newton made sure the slaves in his care received humane treatment. In time a serious illness ended his seafaring days. Newton eventually found work in Liverpool, England, where he met George Whitefield and John Wesley, icons of the Methodist movement. Eventually Newton became a minister himself, preaching to crowds so large they necessitated expanding the church building to accommodate them. Then in 1767, William Cowper, a poet, became friends with John Newton. Together they assembled a hymnal in 1779 featuring 68 pieces by Cowper and 280 by Newton,

including the song now known as “Amazing Grace.” Although the tune we are familiar with today is attributed to an early American folk melody, there has been some speculation that the tune may have originated in a song sung by the slaves Newtown had traded.

In the original publication of “Amazing Grace” reference is made to 1 Chronicles 17:16-17, when King David sat before the Lord in awe of his promise that the House of David would always have a man on the throne of Israel. Others feel it is more likely that “Amazing Grace” is based on Ephesians 2:4-9, Paul’s treatise on grace.

Ephesians 2:4-9 (NIV2011)

⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,

⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,

⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

In his final years, Newton became a rector of St. Mary Woolnoth in London. There he continued to draw large crowds, among whom was the future abolitionist, William Wilberforce. Newton preached until the last year of his life, ironically, he was blind by then. He died December 21, 1807.

Although Newton was physically blind when he died, spiritually he could see quite well. The sin in his life that he had been blind to had been revealed to him by the Lord and this sight changed the course of not only his life, but the lives of many others.

In today's text we meet a man blind from birth that must eke out a living as a beggar. When approached by Jesus and the disciples, the disciples ask Jesus who sinned that this man would be born blind. Jesus' answer was shocking: no one, neither the man nor his parents had sinned. At this place in time diseases and disabilities were thought to be the result of sin or demons and spirits. Jesus continued that this man was born blind so that God's glory could be revealed (John 9:3). Then with mud made with dust and spit, Jesus put the mud on the man's eyes, told him to wash at the pool of Siloam, and the man was then able to see for the first time in his life. Grace was extended to his man who had suffered all his life due to his blindness, and this grace was freely given. He had not asked for it. How much more then can we expect from God when we actively seek His grace?

The Lord used water mixed with dirt to heal the blind man, and the raging sea to "heal" John Newton of his sin. Our baptism by water begins our process of transformation from sinful creatures into God's holy people. From that point on the "living water" that is Jesus sustains and motivates that transformation. John Newton attests to that in verse 3 of Amazing Grace:

Through many dangers, toils and snares...

we have already come.

T'was Grace that brought us safe thus far...

and Grace will lead us home.

We know from the historical record that John Newton allowed God's grace to lead him home. In the case of the man born blind we're not certain because his story ends too soon. We do know that this man was called before the Council because we have this exchange found in John 9:

John 9:24-33 (NIV2011)

²⁴ A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

²⁵ He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

²⁶ Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

²⁷ He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"

²⁸ Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses!"

²⁹ We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

³⁰ The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes.

³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will.

³² Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind.

³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

Did the man then become a disciple of Jesus? The text doesn't tell us, although I believe he very well could have become one. Now what about us? Does our story attest to

God's grace at work? Do people question if we are broken because of sin in our lives?
Or can they see God's grace at work in us?

All of us have blind spots in our lives. When those blind spots are brought to light, and we see them for what they are, we are once again transformed from living in our blindness to living in the light that is Jesus, "the Light of the world." (John 9:5) The Lord may not use mud or a raging storm to heal us, but if we ask him to, he will heal us of our blindness and allow us to see the glory that awaits; as John Newton wrote:

When we've been here ten thousand years...
bright shining as the sun.
We've no less days to sing God's praise...
then when we've first begun.

Prayer:

Lord of light open our eyes that we may see your glory. Let your light guide us on the path that leads to you. May your "Amazing Grace" show in us so that others might come to seek you also and share in these words:

The Lord has promised good to me...
His word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be...
as long as life endures.

AMEN

Pastor Lynne Allebach

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