

Amazing Grace, Part I: Prevenient Grace
Luke 15:1-3, 8-10; II Corinthians 8:1-9; Ephesians 2:4-9
Hamden Plains United Methodist Church, Hamden, Connecticut
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In the midst of bad news, Christian faith is good news! God loves us and wants us to love and be loved. That, simply, is what “Amazing Grace” is all about: God’s love, freely given.

Today and for the next two Sundays we will explore and, I hope, experience, God’s freely-given love. For some, this will be “a refresher;” for others, “new” as well as “good” news. Either way these messages will be self-consciously “teaching” sermons, inviting you to turn with me to selected passages from the Bible and sections of the Hymnal. In fact, go ahead right now and turn to Hymn #337 so you’ll be ready.

As you are doing that, consider this definition of “grace” by Philip Watson over a half-century ago:

“the love of God in action, entering into the life of humanity to succor and save. It is giving and forgiving love, selfless, self-sacrificing love, powerfully manifested among [people] and redemptively at work on their behalf.” (The Concept of Grace, Epworth Press, 1959, p.12)

God seeks a relationship with us! As St. Augustine said, *“Thou hast made us for thy self and restless is our heart until it comes to rest in Thee.”* We so often are restless because we mistakenly believe we’re the only ones searching. But God is searching, too! Our restless souls are found by God. That’s grace!

So back to our hymnals. The theology of grace has three expressions, and those comprise the themes of the next three Sundays. Look at Hymn #337 and note in the upper left corner the words “prevenient grace.” Although it’s not in Webster’s and shows up as a spelling error in “Spell Check,” “prevenient” is a theological word that shows up in a Google search. It comes from a Latin root meaning “to go before.” More on that shortly.

Now turn to Hymn #361. “Justifying grace” is the love of God paid for our misdeeds, our sin. Instead of receiving pure justice for our sin, God paid the price in Christ’s death. God’s love in Christ has justified us; put us in right relationship, with God. Now turn to Hymn #382. Being in right relationship with God puts us on a new path. “Sanctifying grace” causes us to live after the pattern of Jesus, growing in holiness and righteousness. These three forms of grace—prevenient, justifying, sanctifying—form three messages.

So, “prevenient grace” comes from a Latin root meaning “to go before.” (The Rev. Mr. Wesley, founder of Methodism, used the phrase “preventing grace,” but the meaning of “preventing” is different for us now.) In either case, this grace, God’s love for us, goes before anything we say or do. This contrasts with much human love which calculates, consciously or not, “What’s in it for me?” Perhaps the closest human analogy is a parent’s love for a child, given unconditionally even before that child is born.

This prevenient grace truly is amazing! It is so scandalous that Jesus immediately had to explain himself for the religious folk of his day. Now turn to the Gospel: Luke 15: 1-3, 8-10, Bible p.952. Note what is going on. Jesus is, in verse 2, eating with outcasts. Holy people don’t associate with unholy people, or so some think.

Jesus’ response is that God came to seek and save the lost. He tells three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Allow me to focus on the lost coin. The coin might have been the only money the woman had. Certainly it was valuable in a time when people seldom had hard currency. The urgency of her search is unmistakable. Years ago, when he was a little boy, my eldest son Daniel also searched for a coin. He had received a dollar coin as a gift when they first came out and carted it all about the house. And then he lost it. The urgency of the search and the tension in the household in seeking this treasure was palpable.

What a relief when, after a long day, I went to feed our cat and there, looking up at me from the cat food box, was Susan B. Anthony. Dan had forgotten to tell us he had been there!

Now, with your Bible open, return to the Hymnal. Note that there are two dimensions to this prevenient grace. The first is “invitation,” hymns 337-350. God continually invites us into the divine love. God is actively seeking us! “Invite” is from the Latin “invitare,” to offer an incentive, to entice. This woman is actively seeking the coin. She is making it possible for the coin to be found. She will find it! And so it is with God, toward us! The “Hound of Heaven” will find us.

The second dimension to being found is expressed in Hymns 351-359, titled “repentance.” From the Greek, “metanoia,” literally “to turn around,” this love that runs before awakens in us awareness of our need to turn back to God. By the great and grand vista it affords of our worth before God, it awakens in us the extent to which we have cheapened our value as God’s treasure. But beware! Repentance is not self-loathing or self-deprecation, simply beating one’s breast and saying “*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*”—“through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault. As Mr. Wesley put it:

“Repentance is not so much remorse as it is true self-understanding. Repent, that is, know yourselves...know thyself to be a sinner, and what manner of sinner thou art.”

Is this so difficult? Yes. Yes, it is. One of my favorite Confirmation exam questions is this sentence completion: “*Grace means....*” followed by four choices, one of which reads “our good works earn God’s love.” How often, even after a school year of confirmation study, our young people choose that answer reflects the degree to which we feel we must earn things, including the love of the One who created us.

Yet look now at Ephesians 2, Bible page 1064, especially vss 4-5 and 8-9. God's love is a free gift. God loves everyone. No exceptions.

Make no mistake. Jesus Christ calls us to changed lives. But not as a means to earn God's love. A changed life is a response to God's love, turning from destructive ways toward the God whose love brings wholeness and healing. Now look with me at II Corinthians 8:1-9, Bible p.1055. This story of Christian stewardship, of helping neighbors in dire need, is an entire message by itself to be preached another day. The point for *this* message is that the generous response of the Macadonian Christians came as a response to the love shown them by the missionary Paul. Being loved, their giving to a special offering became a tangible way to love others.

That's how it is with grace. God's initiative of love reaches again and again until we turn and say "yes!" When we do—accept the gift and the Giver—our lives change forever and we find that true home where, as Augustine said, "*we rest in Thee.*"

That is, of course, the story of John Newton, the author of the hymn, "Amazing Grace." Son of an English sea captain, he went to sea at age 11, ultimately becoming a slave-ship captain during the most dreadful years of that traffic in Black humanity. Then he was converted. He left slaving and was influenced by John Wesley and George Whitfield (the latter an English evangelical who toured America, including preaching in Milford in the late 1760's).

He ultimately became a curate—an assistant pastor—at Olney, England, where he earned a reputation as a preacher and poet. Collaborating with William Cowper, he wrote such hymns as "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken," "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" and "Amazing Grace."

But grace and God were not finished with John Newton. The anguish of his slaving past could not be forgotten, and Newton became the motivating influence on William Wilberforce and the

peaceful abolition of the slave trade in the British commonwealth in 1834. Over 30 years before America required a civil war to do so, Great Britain abolished slavery in peace, in part because of John Newton.

So significant was his moral influence that in 1792 the College of New Jersey—now Princeton University—conferred three honorary degrees. Note the date: less than a decade after the Treaty of Paris, ending the American Revolution, and four years after the adoption of the Constitution. Two of the recipients were leading Americans: Alexander Hamilton, first Secretary of the Treasury; and Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and third President of the U.S. The last honorary degree? To John Newton.

Yet for Newton his greatest honor was grace. His epitaph reads in part:

John Newton, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy....

If we do not know this morning that God loves us without condition, hear that Gospel assurance. For those that do, remember it. For all of us, may this truth comfort us again by the love of God and galvanize us to share it with others. Amen.