

“One Life – A Parable of God’s Grace”

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Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

I had never been fond of the hymn Amazing Grace. It’s one of those hymns that some church organists just play much too slow. It’s featured too often on TV and in movies as a cheap way to connect with our emotions. As a life-long Methodist, I have sung many great hymns and Amazing Grace just seemed... soppy.

My opinion changed somewhat when I watched the movie of the same name. Taking place in the 1700s, the main story is about William Wilburforce and his battle to end England’s slave trade. One side piece of the story shows his relationship with his mentor John Newton, former slave-trade sea captain and priest.

While Grace is the topic for today’s message, Newton is its focus. To give some perspective, John Newton was born in London about 20 years after John Wesley, who was born and spent his early years in northern England. Wesley’s mother, Susanna, was a great influence on her children, teaching them – girls and boys alike – Latin and Greek, raising them with a strong knowledge of and faith in God. She lived well into their adulthood. John Wesley eventually became an Anglican priest like his father.

John Newton’s mother taught him to read scripture and would take him to church. But she died when he was seven, and he was left in the care of his sea captain father. As a youth, he sailed with his father, or when he wasn’t at sea, ran around and got into trouble, gradually took up the vices of many young men of his era.

Returning from a voyage to Venice, Newton had a vivid dream that stayed with him. In it, a stranger gave him a precious ring, cautioning him to safeguard it. Then, another stranger made fun of his trust in the trinket and was persuasive enough that Newton removed it from his finger dropped it overboard. As soon as he did, the stranger gloated that he had, in truth, thrown away God’s mercy.

Terrified, Newton awaited his fate, certain that he was destined to eternal flames. Still dreaming, the first – or was it another? – stranger recovered the ring but would not give it back to him, saying he was too foolish to value it.

Awaking from his dream, Newton resolved to live better and for a few weeks he did, but it didn't last. He had never quite accepted the Puritan understanding of a wrathful God that he'd received from his mother, but he knew nothing else. This left him an easy mark for cynics and free-thinkers.

After one such conversion, Newton struck up a friendship with a young midshipman, Job Lewis, whose beliefs had kept him centered in spite of all that was going on around him. A persuasive speaker himself, Newton's conversation convinced the young man to abandon his faith.

We have all done things we shouldn't have done. Sometimes there are no noticeable consequences. Still, the key word might be noticeable. For how often do we keep paying attention after we've said our piece or done what shouldn't have been done?

John Newton became as foul-mouthed, ungodly a seaman as they came. His lifestyle was not one you'd want your grandchildren to emulate. But all that would change.

The ship he was on got caught in violent storm and was in trouble. The human cargo below were suffering. The crew tied themselves to the ship to keep from being swept overboard. As Newton pumped and bailed all night, he reflected on his life – the twists it had taken, the warning and deliverances he had experienced, his unfaithful ways.

He was sure he had sinned too much for any hope that God would forgive him. Yet in that storm when death might come at any moment, he breathed his first prayer in years. Later, he would recall that this was “the hour he first believed.”

Although there was another rocky time for his faith, he never lost it again. He developed a regular habit of prayer. Humility became his guiding practice.

Two years later, still in his 20s, he married his sweetheart. After that, he captained a pair of ships – slaving vessels. He began to pray for his human cargo.

Although this man now had faith, it took years for him to come to where he recognized slavery and the slave trade as an act against God's intention. He was part of his context – just as we are a part of ours – and in 18th century England the slave trade was an honest profession. What “normal” things do you do, that are just part of the way people live today, that – when you take the time to examine them – are also against God's intention?

When in your faith journey have you hit a rocky patch? What got you through it, or are you still in it? Do you trust that God is with you even as you face terrible situations, even as you know that you have done some awful things in your life?

While getting ready for another sea journey, Newton chanced to meet his friend Job Lewis again and invited him to join the ship's crew. The once-faith-filled person was now quite hardened. His cruelty and his disrespect for authority made the captain regret his decision. Still, he tried to help the young man he had wronged, setting him up with a small ship of his own.

Perhaps Lewis's lifestyle left his body easy prey to disease, because when he fell ill with a fever, he was quickly weakened. He died in despair and rage.

Although I didn't think of this until last week, it may be that the nursery rhyme we learned as children about Humpty Dumpty was supposed to teach us that you can't unbreak an egg. You can't unring a bell. You can only go forward. John Newton carried the shame and regret over his part in destroying this man's faith for a long time.

We are our own worst critics. And maybe that helps us make the effort to avoid some of what we might otherwise do. We mature. We want to pretend those things we did never happened, wipe them from our memories. Yet we seldom succeed. Even if everyone else was doing it – whatever it was – we feel ashamed.

Not long after Job Lewis's death, Newton met Alexander Clunie. Clunie was a Scottish captain, not involved in the slave trade. He became Newton's first close Christian friend. They spent some weeks together as Newton recovered from his own bout with fever. And as Clunie shared his faith and his understanding of what God is, Newton was all ears.

He had always thought of God as a distant ruler that we must obey. Harsh and not particularly forgiving. Now he learned that God could be very near and that God's love is beyond what he had ever dreamed. Talk about turning points!



Changes in the world gradually led to changes in Newton's life. With England's Seven Year War, he took a job on land. A few years later, he realized God was leading him to preach. When the English church wouldn't appoint him to his church – they didn't want any more Methodists in more pulpits than they already had, and that's what he had grown to be – he began holding services in his home. With that came hymn writing.

While John Wesley's younger brother Charles wrote more hymns – more than 6000 – in the U.S. one of John Newton's hymns is easily more famous. When we sing Amazing Grace in a few minutes, look at the fine print at the bottom of the page and you'll see his name.

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 many of us, it takes years before we can believe that God loves us unconditionally. And once we believe that, accepting the grace God offers can still be difficult because of our own inner voices that tell us we don't deserve it.

The wonderful thing about God's grace is that it has nothing to do with deserving. It's about love. The Source of all that is loves us with a love that sees all that we are and all that we've done and loves us anyway. It's a love that longs to connect with us and be a part of our day-to-day lives.

The Lord has promised good to me, God's word my hope secures;
God will my shield and portion be, as long as life endures.

Part of that grace God offers – that love and acceptance and forgiveness and hope – is that God does want good for each of us. This isn't to say that there won't be problems. Bad things happen. Many are human made; others are natural parts of life. Yet even in the midst of the worst life can throw at us, God is. With us. Sharing in the struggle, the fear, the grief.

This is where we find hope. And with God's hope, with God's amazing grace, we too can weather any storm.

Amen.