

“Amazing Grace”

1 Chronicles 17:16-17 and Ephesians 2:1-10

Rev. Liz Kearny

Longview Presbyterian Church

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“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.”

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This Sunday until Pentecost, we will be preaching on the favorite hymns of our faith. This series will also give us time to get to know our new Glory to God hymnals, which we have been using since the season of Lent began. Many of you cast your vote

for your favorite hymn of all time and we took the hymns with the most votes to determine the ones we would be preaching on. You'll find the hymn preaching schedule printed in your bulletins. The main thing I learned about you all in this process is that you love LOTS of different hymns. No single hymn received more than 3 votes and those of you who voted voted for 22 separate hymns. Don't worry, we are doing our best to make sure we get to sing as many of the voted-on hymns as we can during this series, even if they didn't get enough votes to be preached on. This congregation loves to make music, and during this season, we will explore the well-loved songs that help us connect to our faith in Jesus in ways that only music can.

It feels appropriate that we kick off this series with a hymn that is not only beloved in Christian churches, but also in popular culture. Amazing Grace is one of the rare hymns that has topped the charts of secular music in America and I'm sure all of us have heard more versions of it than we can count. I could tell you all kinds of interesting facts about this hymn and its writer, John Newton, a perpetrator of the African slave trade who underwent a profound transformation and became an Anglican priest. But today, I want to focus on one of the most interesting things I learned about the history of this beloved hymn: the habit of many hymnal editors to get rid of the word "wretch" that we hear in the first verse of this song.

The words are familiar to many of us: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a *wretch* like me." But as this hymn has been added to many a hymnal since it was first written by John Newton in the 1700s, that one line has been re-written again and again to erase that word *wretch*, a word that makes many,

including myself, pretty uncomfortable. Some rewrites include: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, hat saveth men like me!” “That saved and strengthened me!” “That saved a soul like me”, or “That saved and set me free”.

I’m not here today to defend that word *wretch*, which Dictionary.com defines as “a deplorably unfortunate or unhappy person,” or “a person of despicable or base character.”¹ I think there are very compassionate reasons to adjust this original wording in the hymn. Metropolitan Community Church, for example, a denomination that arose specifically to welcome and provide a space of worship for LGBTQ+ folks, chose to rewrite this line I imagine because members of this particular community had been told over and over again by the church that they had no worth in God’s eyes because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. That to me sounds like a solid, compassionate reason to remove the word *wretch* from that community’s hymnal.

But as I read about this common trend of editing out that word *wretch*, I did start thinking about a familiar urge of my own: my consistent habit of making myself sound better than I know I am, editing out the parts of my life where I’ve made choices that are self-centered, greedy, or destructive so that I won’t seem quite so broken to those who know me. Some examples: I call it “venting” instead of “gossiping.” I call it “working too hard” rather than “overworking to prove that I’m better than everyone else”. I call it “keeping the peace” rather than “hiding in my white privilege as I fail to address the systemic racism playing out in this conversation at the dinner table”. I may not have been a slave trader off the coast of Africa like John Newton, but I have let my

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/wretch>

selfishness run wild and pushed someone down to pull myself up and perpetuated systems of injustice with the best of them.

Because the truth is, I don't want to talk about the 's' word in my life: sin, which is really just a fancy word for anything that separates us from God and each other and this beautiful world God created. I have convinced myself that if I dress up my brokenness just so, I will make myself more presentable to God and the people I love. I've convinced myself that I am loved because I have written out the parts of my life that make me less lovable. One of my favorite authors, Glennon Doyle, calls this sending my "representative" into my relationships,² that version of myself that has been edited and censored, rather than actually showing up as myself, with all my messes and failures and vulnerabilities and yes, wretchedness, out in the open. I have convinced myself that this hiding will win the love I am longing for.

What's ironic, though, is that this dressing up, this sending my "representative" into my relationships, does not accomplish the safety and security I hope it will. Because in the process of trying to hide my sin, I actually end up hiding *myself* from experiencing God's abundant love and being truly known by the people with whom I long to have connection.

And I have to wonder if that is part of the reason, no matter how many rewrites that word *wretch* has gotten in hymnbooks, that popular culture always seems to come back to Newton's original wording: "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." At our core, we are craving spaces where we don't have to hide. Spaces where we can stop pretending.

² Glennon Doyle, "Love Warrior," pg. 19.

Spaces where our failures and screw-ups and yes, *sins*, can be totally laid bare and where we can know that we are deeply and irrevocably loved all the same. Spaces where we can say that we have been blind and lost and at times, yes, truly wretched, spaces where the identity of our “representative” can finally fall to the ground and the amazing grace that has always been ours can finally flow like water to drench us, to surround us, to baptize us.

This space of complete vulnerability is where that slave-trader-turned-pastor, John Newton, lived and moved and had his being. Though he grew up with a mother who taught him all kinds of Bible verses and trained him in the Westminster Catechism, he says himself that he was his slave “ship’s chief blasphemer, the loudest swearer, the man who mocked the Lord’s existence”.³ After his conversion to Christianity, which hit a climax when he was many hours in to being tied to the helm of his ship during a horrific storm, his ministry was marked by a brutal honesty about his sin and a reveling in the unbelievable grace of God in saving him. “I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me,” Newton wrote years after his conversion, “that I was once an instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”⁴ It was this continual confession of his brokenness that actually fueled his commitment to the abolitionist movement in late eighteenth-century England, where Newton had a profound influence on famous abolitionist William Wilberforce. When Newton died at age eighty-two, it is said that he whispered to his friend, “My memory is nearly gone. But I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.”

³ “Amazing Grace: John Newton and His Great Hymn”, by David B. Calhoun, http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/Amazing_Grace_page2 .

⁴ “Amazing Grace: John Newton and His Great Hymn”, by David B. Calhoun, http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/Amazing_Grace_page5

Newton knew the wideness of God's grace because he refused to hide from the depths of his brokenness. Newton's whole life had become a constant echo of King David's words of wonder in our 1 Chronicles text, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" Newton knew, as it says in our Ephesians text, that "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..." and that "by grace" Newton had been saved. I'm guessing that's why John Newton was able to write the words to that beloved hymn that folks inside and outside the church have loved and wept over and sung through their tears for centuries.

Friends, the great mystery put so beautifully in this hymn is that the door we open to lay bare our brokenness is the *very same door* that lets in all that grace that is waiting to make us whole. Confession of our sin and the amazing grace of God are inseparable friends. They belong together. As we sing this beloved hymn together, hear its invitation for you to stop showing up as your "representative" in your relationship with God and others and to start showing up as the child of God you are, with all the messiness and beauty and brokenness that comes with you. As you sing, try naming the people in your life who could be a safe place to confess your messes if you allow them to be. Then God can prove to you that you are not alone and those siblings of yours in the body of Christ can be conduits of God's grace. It is risky. It will make you vulnerable to stop hiding. But that's where the grace is, friends, that amazing grace that has been ours from the beginning, that grace that can transform us and heal us and make us new. Amen.