

“Grace is Amazing!”
Sunday, March 13, 2016
Ephesians 2:1-10
A Sermon by Rev. John Lougheed

It is good to be ‘home’ to Lawrence Park, and to share in the leadership of worship with my colleagues and friends Eric, Mark, Rhiannon, Tim, the marvellous choir, and you good folks!

As we continue to ‘lean into Lent’ this morning, I want to pay some homage to John Newton ... the 18th century *slave* trader whose renunciation of *that* cruelty, led to his conversion to the Christian faith, the Anglican priesthood, and hymn writing about *Grace*. No doubt the most famous and beloved of which is “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” with the singing of which we’ll close this Service today. In a remarkable – perhaps apocryphal – scene from the movie “Gladstone,” that great British champion of the abolition of the slave trade, meets the ailing – and nearly blind! – Reverend Newton, with appreciation for his faithful example, expressed so well in the words of his hymn.

Closer to home, for many years it was my privilege to work with Grace, a Nurse in the adult inpatient mental health program at Grand River Hospital in Kitchener, who we used to call “Amazing Grace,” because she was. I recall one night in particular, when a troubled parent, accompanied by her two young adult sons needed admission to the hospital. It is her sons’ angst that I recall clearly: was there anything they *could have* done; was there anything they could do *now*? And even *more* clearly, I recall Grace’s affirmation of their accompaniment of their Mom, their presence now, and pledge of ongoing support. It was amazing.

In a letter attributed to him, St. Paul was reaching out to the Church at Ephesus, seeking to convert more people to follow Jesus as Christians. In our reading this morning from the second chapter of the letter, Paul seems to dwell on their *disobedience*, which includes veering away from the invitation of the Ten Commandments, shared by Jews and Christians alike. Though sometimes remembered for a ‘thou shalt not’ tone – including Paul’s! – they can also be heard as invitational, as in: “*if* you have no other Gods ...” ; *if* you honour your mother and father” *then* you will be in right relationship with God. So sin – whatever its form – can be understood as the things we have done, or not done, that separate us from God’s purposes of salvation; of right relationship.

“God, rich in mercy” Paul reminds us, “out of great love” ... makes us ‘alive together with Christ – by grace we have been saved.’ New beginnings.

As we explored earlier around the font with the children and their leaders, grace is love *freely* given; with *nothing* we could do to deserve *or* lose such love. In the case of infant baptism, their innocence reminds us that God *created* us and desires an *ongoing* relationship with us. So baptism is an ‘outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible truth.’ So is Communion. When we recall the Last Supper of Jesus with his friends, and how he would be ‘risen in the Body of Christ, the Church,’ that sacrament is an ‘outward and visible sign of an inward, invisible truth.’

As John Newton's lyrics soar: "Grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

Around many home tables *grace* is the name given to the blessing *said* before some meals. One of my Rabbi colleagues tells the story of a young grandchild who tucks into a delicious dinner at their *grandparents*, *before* all the others had been served or a blessing has been offered. When chided by one of their parents about how 'you know we always ask the blessing before we eat at home,' the child replied: "that's true, but Grandma can cook!" Another young one SO enjoyed *grace* said – and sometimes sung – at Church gatherings, their favourite was "God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food. Amen," but a *younger* sibling wanted a turn at the family table and solemnly said "God is *grace*, God is good ..." Which is *also* true!

For those who like to journal – which has also been called 'prayer through the end of a pen' – some spiritual directors encourage that a journal entry always close with 'asking for a *grace*;' a gift freely given ... like patience, or courage, or peace. In his marvelous article for the October '15 issue of the The United Church Observer, Keith Reynold, Minister at Southampton United, recounts how the faith of Marion Ramsdale – a beloved member of the Choir *there* – was *sung*. He writes, she "walked with music in her step" ... until she couldn't. And when that time came, her friends in the choir made a poignant pilgrimage to her hospital bedside, where they "sang their faith" together. As Keith reflects: "What started out as a gift for *Marion* transformed into something for *all of us* in that room: a gift, a *grace*, a testimony to God whose song resides in all of life – the One whose melody keeps us singing." Keith concludes: "Moments may arise when we struggle to sing. We don't have to; there are others whose song will carry us in the melody of the Mystery." (Spirit Story, October 2015)

Closer to home, when my uncle, Doug Lougheed, was a patient at Baycrest Hospital several years ago, the LPCC Choir visited him there at Christmas time, and offered to sing his favourite carol. Without hesitation he replied ... "Will Your Anchor Hold in the Storms of Life!" And we sang it again at his funeral here. When others sing for us, in the melody of the Mystery.

The Mystery of new beginnings, of Jesus 'wiping away' not just every tear, but any estrangement from God, *if* we are open to such *grace*; and perhaps especially when we're *not*. Jesus who came to proclaim a Kingdom of Peace with Justice, and *as* God's Son, gives us a glimpse of the One who *sent* him, and raised him up. "Raised up with" Jesus is another way that Paul tries to explain salvation. Like what we celebrate in baptism, it is something that is *already* true. Or to paraphrase the late great theologian Paul Tillich: 'sometimes the *greatest* challenge – and *open* invitation - of the Christian life is to 'accept that we are accepted.' *Grace* is amazing!

As St. Paul concludes, "For by *grace* [we] have been saved through faith, and this is not [our] own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works ... for we are what [God] has made us, created ... *for* good works ... to be our way of life." In a verse from *another* of his hymns, John Newton refers to it as "joy to share in lives outpoured."

It is now five hundred (!) years, since leaders of the Reformation in the Church, like Menno Simons, Martin Luther and Mother Catherine - insisted that the teachings of the Roman

Catholic Church - *at that time* – about needing to *earn* salvation, and pay ‘indulgences,’ was *not* scriptural. *Nor* was the baptismal teaching - *at that time* - about so-called ‘Original Sin’. Despite the innate human desire to contribute to one’s right relationship with God, or perhaps to seek a ‘talisman’ of protection, God’s grace was a turning point that led to the reform – the Reformation - of the Church; eventually the *whole* Church. Pope Francis’ *ongoing* reform of his *own* denomination, let alone the challenges he puts to *all of us* on issues of the environment, poverty and justice, is like a *new* Reformation for *all* of us.

The hymn *after* the sermon this morning is sung to the beloved tune “For All the Saints,” reminds us we can always afford to be of *their* example and inspiration. It may be a surprise to some of us to be singing the “Hallelujah” refrains, often set aside in Lent, until Easter. But this morning, I want to invite us to briefly enter into an ancient practice called “Laetare” or “Rejoice” Sunday; a break in the spiritual disciplines of Lent for *this* Sunday, two weeks before Easter. Afterall, we’re celebrating Grace this morning! Hallelujah!

Indeed, the hymn sings of grace, but *also* has challenging assertions about how “*all* knees shall bow” and “let *every* tongue confess ... that Jesus Christ is Lord”. We could opt *not* to sing that hymn or those verses, but I suggest we are better challenged to do so, and to ponder the diversity of our country and world. We *can* be confident in our own beliefs *without* imposing them on others - particularly on those of other faiths dearly held – any more than we would want their faith imposed on us. It has been called a “Dialogical Imperative’ to know what *we* believe – *including* about grace - and then to engage *respectfully* with others of different beliefs, and learn from each other. (*David Lochhead*)

Recalling the Affirming Congregations of *many* denominations that are *actively* inclusive of LGBT members – among other aspects of diversity – I recently attended a remarkable performance of a new play entitled “Listening for Grace.” It explores the journey of a widowed father reflecting on his son ‘coming out,’ and the responses from family, friends and church members. Spoiler alert (!), his late wife’s name is *also* Grace, and her dear memory *certainly* informs his reflections, but it is the Grace of *God* he is listening for, *and* hearing! I commend *anything* by Ted & Company (the playwright and solo actor) to you!

Meanwhile, Amazing Grace *the Nurse* has now retired. And that troubled Mom is now a healthy grandmother, with both her sons as Dads. Love freely given – and accepted – then, and now. A *happy* ending!

A *tragic* ending came to a prayer meeting at an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in June of last year, when someone opened fire on the congregation, killing many, including the Pastor, Clementa Pinckney. The eulogy at the Pastor’s funeral was delivered by none other than Barack Obama, the President of the United States, (He hasn’t even left office yet, and I miss him already!) On that sad day last June, the President used the voice of his insight *and* Office to honour lives cut short, to lament the lack of gun control laws, and to testify that grace *is* amazing! It was one of those moments when we “struggle to sing” and yet the *song* that the President chose to “carry us, in the melody of the Mystery” was none other than: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IN05jVNBs64&list=RDIN05jVNBs64>

(Rev.) John Loughheed
How to Recognize Grace

*It takes you by surprise
It comes in odd packages
It sometimes looks like loss
Or mistakes
It acts like rain
Or like a seed
It's both reliable and unpredictable
It's not what you were aiming at
Or what you thought you deserved
It supplies what you need
Not necessarily what you want
It grows you up
And lets you be a child
It reminds you you're not in control
And that not being in control
Is a form of freedom.*

Marilyn Chandler McEntyre

(A poem on which the Pastoral Prayers were based.)