

“Amazing Grace” by Jackie Wallen

March 30, 2014

The Fourth Sunday in Lent

I haven't always loved the hymn *Amazing Grace*. The version of this hymn that I was first familiar with was droning and rather mournful. It was sung by a church choir but it sounded as if it was being sung by a rag tag group of homeless men and women reluctantly forced to attend a worship service before being served in a Salvation Army soup kitchen. It had an air of unwelcome servitude about it and I found it more depressing than inspiring.

When I was in graduate school at the University of Chicago in the late 60's, one of our favorite things to do was to gather at someone's house on a Saturday night and listen to the folk music program “Midnight Special” on WFMT radio. Isn't that a strange picture now? A bunch of 20-somethings (of course, the phrase “twenty-somethings” had not been invented yet) getting together on a Saturday night to drink some beer and LISTEN TO THE RADIO—and, of course, we didn't have microbrews back then). One Saturday night, before playing this (to me) depressing version of *Amazing Grace*, the WFMT announcer told what he understood to be the story behind the hymn. He said it had been written by a slave ship owner 1748. This slave owner,

whose name was John Newton, had a sudden awakening after his life was spared in a dangerous storm at sea. Recognizing that buying and selling slaves was a terrible sin, he turned his ship around and returned the slaves to Africa. He then became a minister and wrote the hymn. From then on, *Amazing Grace* has been my favorite hymn.

I did some research on John Newton when I was writing this sermon and found out, to my surprise, that Newton actually never did turn his ship around and return the slaves. He did eventually (but not immediately) leave the shipping business and become a minister, though, and he did write the hymn.

But *Amazing Grace* is still my very favorite hymn. Now I find my association of the hymn with soup kitchens enriches its inspirational quality for me. It is a song for people who have hit bottom and found God and it is often played at the funerals and memorial services of people who have found recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous. (It's interesting that the Salvation Army now has a new ad featuring the lyrics of the hymn along with pictures of diverse people who presumably have been helped by Salvation Army services—you can see the ad on You Tube.)

“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.”

I picked *Amazing Grace* as the theme for this sermon because it reflects a theme in my life and in the Gospel reading for this week. The phrase “I was blind but now I see” occurs in today's reading from the gospel, which has to do with the Galilean man, blind since birth, who was miraculously healed by Jesus. Referring to himself as the “light of the world,” Jesus made mud with dirt and his saliva and spread it on the blind man's eyes (EUW! Gross!). After spreading the mud on the blind man's eyes, Jesus told him to wash his eyes in the pure

water of a nearby pool. When the man returned, he could see.

Why did Jesus use saliva, anyway? Why not something more sanitary and less disgusting like clear water from the nearby pool. I did some research on this and found a number of explanations. Some say that saliva was thought to have healing properties at that time. Others say it was a treatment that healers at the time used to cure blindness specifically. Still others say that the saliva of legitimate heirs (and Jesus was God's legitimate heir as his first and only son) was believed to have the ability to cure injuries and disease.

I have another thought to add to these explanations.

I think spiritual healing requires humility. It is not a clean and dignified process. It is messy and involves hitting bottom, as they say in AA and the other 12-step programs, which is not a pretty sight.

We tend to have negative associations to the concepts of humility and humiliation but, as a person who is constantly bumping up against my own limitations, I have come to respect the healthy and healing properties of humility.

To me, humility means having a clear and honest assessment of one's strengths and weaknesses and respect for one's place in the overall scheme of things. Humiliation occurs when we are forced to replace denial about our weaknesses, failings or missteps with the honest truth. Humility does not allow for either the extreme of grandiosity or the other extreme of self-hate. It is a balanced and accurate perception of oneself.

The Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, gives a good example of humiliation:

Each day, we're given many opportunities to open up or shut down. The most precious opportunity presents itself when we come to the place where we think we can't handle whatever is

happening. It's too much. It's gone too far. We feel bad about ourselves. There is no way we can manipulate the situation to make ourselves come out looking good. No matter how hard we try, it just won't work. Basically, life has just nailed us.

It's as if you just looked at yourself in the mirror, and you saw a gorilla. The mirror's there; it's showing you, and what you see looks bad. You try to angle the mirror so you will look a little better, but no matter what you do, you still look like a gorilla. That's being nailed by life, the place where you have no choice except to embrace what is happening or push away.

I've been reading a really good book. It's *The Spirituality of Imperfection* by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham. It weaves together insights from Eastern and Western philosophies and from the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous to show that imperfection, rather than being something that separates us from God, is the very force that connects us to God.

They say:

A spirituality of imperfection is always aware of the inevitability of suffering. As Simon Tugwell noted in his analysis of the *Ways of Imperfection*, 'The first work of grace is simply to enable us to begin to understand what is wrong.' And one of the first things that is 'wrong' is that we are not 'in control;' we do not have all the answers. The reality of that lack of control, the sheer truth of our powerlessness in the face of it, makes available the fundamental spiritual insight that insists on the necessity of *kenosis*, the ancient Greek word that signifies 'emptying out.'" Expressed in modern vocabulary, *kenosis* points to the need for 'surrender," or, in the language of Alcoholics Anonymous, 'hitting bottom.'" In the process of *kenosis*... comes the realization that by ourselves, we are lost.

Helplessness and imperfection are the cauldron in which spirituality and healing are formed. Why else would we turn to a higher power? If we could manage everything ourselves we wouldn't need a God. Or, as Kurtz and Ketcham say: "Spiritual sensibilities begin to flower when the soil is fertilized with the understanding that 'something is awry.'"

In the hymn "Amazing Grace," John Newton wrote:

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear

And grace my fears relieved...

The recognition that "something is awry" and that we are not who we think we should be or who we thought we were is what causes us to turn to God for healing and the relief of our suffering and what opens us to God's amazing grace. It is actually a gift.

Kurtz and Ketcham quote the 18th century spiritual director Jean-Pierre Caussade as saying ""Rejoice every time you discover a new spiritual imperfection." (Can you picture yourself saying, "Oh, isn't this fun, I've discovered yet *another* spiritual imperfection.")

Scott Peck, who wrote *The Road Less Travelled*, also wrote a less-well-known book called *People of the Lie*. In this book Peck argues that denial is the fundamental sin.

Therese of Lisieux said: "If you are willing to bear serenely the trial of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter." Peck says that sin is being unwilling to "serenely bear the trial of being displeasing to oneself."

Paul, in the 5th chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, which we heard read today, talks about the importance of living "as children of the light" rather than living in darkness. Secret sins exposed to the light *become* light and Christ shines on

those who expose them. The fruit of the light is all that is good and true.

The “big book” of Alcoholics Anonymous has a wonderful passage that describes the fruits of exposing our imperfections to the light and doing our best to make amends for any harm we have done because of them. It is about that amazing grace that comes from an honest acknowledgment of one’s imperfections. It’s called “The Promises of AA and it says:

If we are painstaking about this phase of our development, we will be amazed before we are half way through. We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

And that brings me to another reading that is in the lectionary for today, though it wasn’t read here earlier because we don’t ordinarily read the Psalm. It is the 23rd Psalm and I am going to read it today in closing because I see it, too, as a promise – a description of the rewards we experience for bearing serenely (or even not-too-serenely) the trial of being displeasing to ourselves. I’m going to read the King James version because I really love it:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still

waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Just remember this:

I'm not okay

And you're not okay.

And that's okay!

And keep coming back. Because, you know, it works if you work it!