

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. There are perhaps no more memorable or recognized words of a hymn in the world. If the tune starts to play, we hum along and may even sing the words. If someone starts to sing it in a group, we sing along (or at least hum). John Newton's words, written in 1779, have been recorded more than 7,000 times by various artists in various genres. The words are just as powerful as they've ever been - still meaningful because they remind us of the true meaning of grace - God's unmerited love that saves us. And they're very much grounded in Paul's words to the Ephesians - *by grace you have been saved...*

You may know Newton's story. He was a captain of a slave ship. He invested in the slave trade. He experienced a renewal of faith during a storm at sea, and eventually found his way into ministry in the Church of England. He worked with a poet, and they wrote hymns. Newton was supportive of John Wesley and the Methodist movement in the mid-1700s, and he became a mentor for William Wilberforce, an abolitionist.

Newton wrote his confession about his life in the slave trade and his personal transformation. He even testified before Parliament, urging them to abolish slavery. Knowing the story behind the hymn makes it even more powerful. Perhaps it speaks to us because, as C. Michael Hawn explains, Newton himself

probably thought of what he had written as an outline of the typical journey from utter despair...to confident faith..." That journey is grounded in God's grace.

Our *Book of Discipline* defines grace as "the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit." The apostle Paul starts a letter to the Ephesians with a reminder of God's initiative to save us: "By grace you have been saved through faith. It is a gift of God so that no one can boast." This is about relationship. God forgives us. God gives second (and third and fourth and twentieth) chances. We are helpless when it comes to salvation. Grace really is the gift of God's presence and power that we receive. We don't earn it. We don't deserve it, but God, who is rich in mercy and who loves us, offers it to us, and we receive it by faith - trusting in God's goodness and Christ's sacrificial love. God helps because we can't help ourselves. The Gospel of John tells us that "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us... full of grace and truth."

Grace is from God, revealed fully in Jesus - this amazing gift of love without expecting any in return, and yet, there's something about grace that calls us to respond to it. Steve Harper writes, "Discipleship is a whole-life response to grace." As someone said once in a worship meeting, "You can't repay grace, but you can pay it forward."

So many times we struggle to accept grace from others. We don't want to be on the receiving end, even though we've been on the giving end and know how important it is to do something for others when they need help. During my mom's cancer treatment this last year, she mentioned so many times how cards, texts, and kind acts of people blessed her so richly. For me, it was an obvious example of God's grace at work through people.

My mom also kept saying, "I need to write that person a note or call this person and thank them." I don't think that was anyone's expectation, but she wanted to respond. Learning to accept grace *graciously* may be challenging – and allowing those experiences to transform us is something we keep on working on. Grace is a long view of God's love. If we're honest, giving and receiving grace, and how that interacts with forgiveness and reconciliation are lifetime lessons. That goes back to the relational aspect of grace - with God and in community.

My mom isn't the first person to tell me how they've experienced grace through the church and community. One woman who was diagnosed with breast cancer at a young age shared with me her understanding of grace as unconditional love. Another woman, a mom whose teenage son died in a car accident, had the word GRACE in a frame on her wall as a reminder of God's presence through the tragic time and continued healing.

How do we understand God's grace at work in our lives? Grace takes on

movement in our lives, and in our Methodist tradition, we have some names for that movement. Again, John Wesley wasn't seeking to create a new denomination, but the Methodist movement offered distinct emphases on grace.

SLIDE: Movement of grace

Prevenient grace – “comes before” we even recognize it, prepares us to accept God's love. This is why we practice infant baptism – because we believe that God's grace is already at work in an infant's life. God's love is there from the beginning – preparing our hearts to love God. One saying that's credited to Wesley is: “Grace for all. Grace in all.” It's a reminder that no one stands outside of God's grace - and God's grace is active right now.

Justifying grace – makes us right with God, restores us, that moment of accepting Christ. In order to understand justifying grace, we have to understand why we need it, so we have to acknowledge and be convicted of our sin.

Sin is sometimes described in archery terms - “missing the mark.” If you've ever tried to hit a target, it's a great image. We do the things that we shouldn't do; we don't the things we should do – and all of that grieves God's heart. We can't save ourselves. Grace means that in spite of sin, we are made one with God through grace because of Jesus' saving work on the cross. Our broken relationship with God is restored by God's grace. And even though we have that relationship with Jesus, we're not done. There's more work that God does in us.

John Wesley was raised in the church, and yet he struggled to truly accept God's grace for himself until later on. In a season when he was unsure about his faith, a friend invited him to go to a prayer meeting at church, and Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" as he listened. He wrote in his journal in May 1738:

SLIDE "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Sanctifying grace – helps us to grow in holiness of heart and life, works in us by the Holy Spirit. Last week, we prayed, *Lord, I want to be more holy in my heart...* God isn't finished with us; we're not finished growing in grace.

These three create a movement of grace and remind us that our life of faith is a journey that we're on with God and each other. It's not static, but incredibly dynamic. John Wesley even used the image of a house to explain it. He saw prevenient grace as the porch that invites us to come further. Justifying grace is the door into the house that we must open and come inside if we truly are to experience and know the whole house. Sanctifying grace is learning to live in and grow in the whole house. Ultimately, grace changes us.

Grace is a free gift, but it's not a free pass. Grace is unconditional love and affirmation of who we are as beloved by God. Grace doesn't discount the need for accountability or responsibility. As grace works in us, we grow in holiness -

becoming more aware of it, extending it to others, and remembering that we're never outside of it.

I saw a powerful example of grace in one of my favorite shows - *Grantchester*. Set in the 1950s, it tells the story of Will, a vicar in the Church of England, and his friendship with Geordie, a detective in the local police force, and others in the community. Together, Will and Geordie solve crimes, but along the way, they also explore themes like grace.

In a recent episode, Will gets into a motorcycle accident that involves another man, who is killed. Struggling with guilt and remorse while in a jail cell, Will has a conversation with his friend, Leonard. As Will laments that he doesn't deserve forgiveness or grace, Leonard reminds him of the need to remember God's grace for himself. Leonard simply states the truth that Will has shared with so many others: "God still loves you very much." The vicar, who has been the one to counsel others and remind them of God's grace no matter what now hears the same word from a trusted friend.

What's your story of grace? Maybe you have a moment of conviction and a journey of conversion. Or maybe it's not a dramatic tale, but what does that movement of grace look like for you? How do we claim our identity in God – not by anyone else's assumptions or predictions - and not by a past, but by a future lived in God's love?

And living in God's love isn't the fluffy stuff. This is hard loving. It's

literally the power of God working in you and me to transform us. Bishop Will Willimon says, "I hear [sometimes that] grace is some sort of affirmative, positive approval by God of us as we are." But Willimon says, grace is "the power of God working in you, sometimes in spite of you, to help you live a different life than you'd be living if God had left you to your own devices."

Think of that - where would we be without God's grace - amazing grace.

Newton wrote the words, but they're for all of us. Writer Anne Lamott offers this:

SLIDE: "I do not understand the mystery of grace — only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us." Thank God, literally, for that.

As we prepare to come to the table, we confess our sin and our need for grace. This is the table where grace abounds and where Christ meets us in the breaking of the bread and sharing the meal. Let us pray. . .

Prayer of Confession:

In becoming one of us, God became poor so we could receive the riches of mercy. In coming to us, God took on our death, so we could be made alive together with Christ.

We offer our confessions, knowing that by grace we have been saved.

The words we speak all too often do not show you in our lives, O God. We spend so much time boasting to others, they imagine we have no need for you. We grumble impatiently when you don't respond immediately to our requests, but are slow to sing your praises. We mutter under our breath about the behavior of those around us rather than focusing on how we can love and serve them.

The riches of your mercy and grace are shown on the cross and at the empty tomb. You love and forgive us - not because of any thing we have done - but because of the compassion which flows from your heart. As we open our lives to receive your forgiveness, may we turn to the Light which brings us life - Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior - every step of the way.

Words of Assurance:

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that through him the world might be saved. Though we were dead through our sins, in great mercy, God has spoken a word of healing and made us alive together with Christ.

Friends in Christ, our sins are forgiven; be at peace.

Thanks be to God! Amen.