

# Amazing Grace

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Sermon for June 14, 1998

## Lessons for Pentecost Proper 6 in Year C

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10

Psalm 32,

Galatians 2:15-21,

Luke 7:36-8:3

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One of the best books I ever read was one that I got as a Christmas present from Cheryl this past year. In fact, it was a book that I asked her to give me as a present after I saw it in the holiday flyer from Sacred Melody. It was a book by one of my favorite authors, Philip Yancey, and it's called **What's So Amazing About Grace?** When I first got it, I figured I'd read a chapter a day, and finish the whole thing in about three weeks. Instead, I found myself with a book I couldn't put down, a book I devoted pretty much every waking moment to reading, a book that I had devoured within a few days, and a book that changed the way I see a lot of things.

It was shortly after I finished the grace book that Pastor Paul gave me the list of preaching dates he needed covered for the summer. When I looked at the dates and the readings that went with them, the ones for this weekend jumped out at me because they tied in so perfectly with what I had just read and things I was still thinking about, and I knew right then and there that this was the weekend I was signing up to preach on. So here I am.

Where to begin...there are many places, but perhaps the best place is with the readings

for this weekend. The reading from Second Samuel talks about David's sin with Bathsheba and his realization of his guilt, but *doesn't* talk about God's reaction that sin. That's saved, perhaps for another set of readings. Psalm 32, on the other hand, goes on about the joy forgiveness. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul talks about how we are saved by faith and the grace of God. And finally, in Luke, Jesus is himself involved in and tells us a story of forgiveness through grace.

Forgiveness and grace, the same thing, inseparable facets of the same thing, things which imply each other? Perhaps...and I'm going to treat them as such as I talk to you today.

Where to begin? My friend Patty was watching one of those abominable TV talk shows a few years ago. You know, the ones that find all the worst cases in society and give them an audience. The shows we all say there should be fewer of, and yet inexplicably their ratings keep going up? Anyway, on this show they were talking about a man who had committed some heinous crime, and a woman from the audience stands up and says that she hopes this man rots in Hell.

Interesting. Patty found this very interesting. Why? Because for all practical pur-

poses, it's we Christians who gave the world the concept of Hell as a place where you go to be punished for evil things. But perhaps more importantly, it's we Christians who gave the world the concept of God's grace and forgiveness shown through Jesus's death for us, and are supposed to want people to seek this forgiveness so that they can be with him forever. Patty found this whole thing interesting because this woman, if she was a Christian, shouldn't be hoping that *anyone* rots in Hell. Warning people of the distinct possibility...yes; saying that a person *deserves* to rot in Hell (as do we all)...maybe; *hoping* that they go there...no.

If anything, we should be hoping that *no one* rots in Hell...not Lewis Lent, not Ted Kaczynski, not even the popular worst case example Adolf Hitler. We should be hoping and praying that at some point all come to understand that they are sinners and need God's grace and forgiveness. And we should remember that we need it too.

In the reading from Luke, Jesus is involved in a story about grace, explaining how the woman is showing such great love because she recognizes the great role that God's grace has played in her life. But he also goes on to tell a cautionary tale of what may happen if you don't respond to the grace shown to you with grace towards others. The fact that God's grace makes it possible for him to forgive us all kinds of things means that we should strive to show that kind of grace too. Perhaps we won't be as perfect in our expressions of grace as God, but that's not the point.

I used to complain to God on a regular basis about my part. Yes, about my part...or rather, the fact that I didn't know what it

was. In this grand production of his, I had no idea what my lines were, what my blocking was, what my entry and exit cues were, how I was supposed to interact with the rest of the cast. There was nothing written out for me, I had to ad lib everything, not knowing what effect it would have on the rest of the people in the show.

I complained saying, "How can I do what you want me to do if you won't tell me what it is?" I was worried that I would, with the best of intentions, do something that hurt someone else. I was worried that I might, with the best of intentions, do something that was totally contrary to what God really wanted. I had reached the point of saying, "Okay. If you don't tell me what you want and how you want me to react in this situation, then it's not my fault if I get it wrong." I was concerned about doing it right, and not getting it wrong.

Then I read Yancey's book, and all of a sudden it all fell into place. I was putting too much emphasis on my getting it right. On my being flawless. On my being blameless. And not enough emphasis on the fact that God's grace was big enough to take care of any number of mistakes I made in good faith. Suddenly I realized that the point was not my getting it right, but trusting God's grace to take care of the places where I inevitably messed up. Once I understood that, things became a lot easier for me. It didn't mean I could now be sloppy about things, knowing that God would mop up after me. It meant that I could now say, "I've done my best, God will do the rest." We are to trust in God's grace, and not in our own efforts.

Once we understand that, things should be a lot easier. It should make it easier for us to go about in our lives not worrying about

messing up. It should also make it easier for us to show grace toward others, knowing that they're doing the best they can, even when they've hurt us.

I first heard of Butterfly McQueen one evening when I was a kid in North Jersey sitting in the backseat of our 1966 Ford Mustang. I don't remember where we were going, but the radio, as usual, was set to WOR 710-AM, and we were listening to Barry Farber interview her. They may have talked about her famous role in **Gone With The Wind**, she's the one who said, "I don't know nothin' about birthin' no babies," and they may have talked about some of her other movie roles. But that's not what I remember. What stuck with me from that interview was her talking about how she had started her own religion because she just couldn't deal with the fact that in Christianity you could do some really horrible, awful things, ask God to forgive you, and then you were all set. It just didn't seem right. It just didn't seem fair.

Well, the funny thing is that in her objections she got it right. That's exactly what God's grace is all about. It is exactly about being able to say, "Oh my God, I've just realized and understood the truly horrible things I've done that I can't possibly make up for. Please forgive me for the sake of your son who died for one such as me." It is exactly about being able to say that and knowing that you will be forgiven.

Yes, Butterfly McQueen was right...it's not fair. If you will not rest until you know that someone will be punished for some terrible deed they did to you, then God's grace is an affront to your sense of justice, and seems like a cheap and easy way out. But, on the

other hand, if you're honest with yourself...brutally honest with yourself...you'll realize that you've done some awful things too, things you might not even be aware of, and that you need to call upon God's grace too.

McQueen and others like her are afraid that people will take advantage of God's grace, and our grace if we offer it, in the worst possible way...planning to do things *knowing* that they'll be forgiven. But I'm not sure that God can be manipulated that easily. I'm not sure that premeditation counts. In order to know and understand that you need grace and forgiveness, you need to know and understand that you've done something wrong. Not just that you've broken some little bureaucratic rule that happened to get in your way, you need to understand that you've done something wrong, and understand the effects of it. Once you understand that, you'll understand God's grace and you'll understand how it will not be manipulated. You'll understand this because you will be changed by it, and once changed by it, you won't seek to be manipulated. The woman who washed Jesus feet with her hair was a perfect example of someone who truly understood grace. The man who was forgiven his great debt, but wouldn't forgive someone else their much smaller one was an example of one who didn't and sought to manipulate it.

What is it that makes us Christians? Basically it's the belief that through God's grace Jesus died for us while we were still sinners, and that it is this same grace that will bring us into God's presence, although by all accounts we don't deserve it, when we die. It is this grace and the faith in it, which is the hall-

mark of Christianity, and the basis of all we believe in.

God's grace, *God's amazing grace*, is the important thing. If we believe, if we truly believe, that God's grace is the main thing, then minor and even major differences in theology between denominations don't matter. Differences in communion practices don't matter. Questions of apostolic succession don't matter. Differences in biblical interpretation or liturgical practice don't matter. If we spend too much time dwelling on these issues, we focus too much, as did I when I worried about my part, on *our* getting it right, and not enough on *God's* grace which

will bring us to him in spite of all the mistakes we made in good faith.

John Newton, was a slave trader who was changed by grace and became a minister and hymn writer. He didn't write "Amazing Theology, how sweet the sound." Nor did he write "Amazing Communion practices" or "Amazing Liturgy." These are simply responses to what is truly important and what he did write about. Please stand and join me now as we sing **Amazing Grace**.

Amen.