

"The Gospel of Second Chances"
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Luke 5:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

There are exceptions, even here among us, but in general, *Amazing Grace* is the most popular hymn in America. (It turns out that there are polls for every question! Even favorite hymns). There is something so sweet about a young child singing *Amazing Grace* with clear words and a high pitch. Sweet and innocent until they sound out the words "a wretch like me." "How can you be a wretch?" I think, as I watch and listen to the child.

In recent years, some have tried to change the words of the hymn to downplay any sense of self-loathing. The second line, "That saved a wretch like me!" has been rewritten as "That saved and strengthened me" or "saved a soul like me." Kathleen Norris in her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* characterizes this transformation of the original words as "wretched English" making the line that replaces the original "laughably bland."¹

Hard as it may be to hear a kid sing those words, I'll stick with saving wretches like me. And Isaiah, the prophet who claims to have "unclean lips." And Simon Peter, who told Jesus, "Go away me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8.) And Paul, who wrote, "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain" (1 Cor 15:9-10).

It may be a bit of a trope, a pattern based more in how it sounds than reality about how wretched these biblical characters were. Were they really wretched, or did it sound humble for them to say that and focus the attention on God's grace and not their exceptionalism? There may be some of that going on in the Bible stories about people being called. Though in the case of Paul, at least, others provide support that Paul indeed was dedicated to persecuting the church, ferocious in his attacks. Knowing that there were other examples we could have picked, such as Moses, who was on the run after killing someone when God called him, lends credence to the use of the word wretch.

It is clear that there are a number of the disciples and Godly characters who have unsavory backgrounds. According to the Bible, God does not seek out only upstanding citizens and good people. Throughout the scriptures, God calls unlikely candidates to do amazing things.

And so I want today to reflect on two faulty ways of thinking. The first is that we think we know better than God who might be appropriate for service to the kingdom – in short, the first faulty way of thinking is to be judgmental and think that we are much better than others and those others are not fit to be useful to God.

The first disciples themselves would fall into this way of thinking. We just heard of the first disciples being called – Simon Peter, James and John, and Simon Peter first tries to tell Jesus to get away from him for he is a sinner. But then they do follow Jesus and get frustrated about others who persist in their sinful ways. And so Jesus once told them a parable, about a field. And how someone had sowed good seed in the field, but then weeds grew up among the wheat. And the question is, should the weeds be gathered up and thrown into the fire so that the wheat can flourish? And Jesus says that the master says no, for in gathering the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. (Matthew 13:24-30).

Jesus did a fair bit of teaching on this topic of not judging others. He also once said,

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while the log is in your own eye? (Matthew 7:1-4)

When we want to judge others, Jesus says, give it a little while. Don't be a hypocrite – you've got your own issues. Don't pull up the weeds with the wheat – for we might uproot the wheat, but we might also mistake the plants thinking something is a weed when it is not. If we used categories for judging others, we would soon find ourselves ruling out many people whom God has called.

Murderers – like Moses
 Cheaters – like Zaccheaus
 Those who have caused irreparable harm
 Even those who made 5 turnovers in a championship game

Okay, on this Super Bowl Sunday we should acknowledge that there is no specific mention of redemption for losing football players in the Bible. But it goes by extrapolation – that fumlbers are not immune from God's grace. The gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, is of second chances. The past does not dictate the future.

The second faulty way of thinking is to think that we are not good enough for God. That our failings are so disqualifying – that we could never be called by God much less loved. This can stem from a poor self-ego, or addictions so powerful we feel ourselves weak, or years of abuse or neglect. We can be the ones who tell ourselves once a fumbler, always a fumbler. We are the ones who can dwell so deeply on our faults and failings that we can't ever listen for God's assurance of pardon and forgiveness.

So I hope that we can take heart in these stories from the Bible – of a prophet called to speak the very words of God through unclean lips, a fisherman who first tried to push Jesus away, the apostle Paul, who is credited with shaping Christianity for the good after a career of persecuting the church. And so you, be ready to be called by God for important work.

And so this leads to the next question, if the song goes, “amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,” the question is, saved for what? If we believe in amazing grace, if we have experienced it ourselves, or hope to experience it some day, then I think it says something about what it is all about.

You know, in our culture, so much time and money is spent trying to cover up our imperfections. We try to identify and rectify every wrinkle, every blemish, every flaw visible to the eyes of others. We put on a mask of invincibility and perfection – to appear flawless and strong in a culture that turns its nose up at weakness. To this, a theology of grace indicates to me that it has to be different in the church. We can be honest about who we are: flawed and frail, imperfect to say the least. Yet we can also say truthfully that we care for one another, that together we experience the love of God who knows us through and through, and loves us still and all.

Second, I think it says something not just about how we interact within the church, I think it also says something about who we invite into the church. If we follow in the ways of Jesus, we do not preach the gospel for perfect people or good people, but good news to all people. And so we ought to be intentional about serving those and inviting those who in particular have been scoffed at and marginalized – those who face taunts and terrors. Those who know what it means to be called wretched. All are welcome here. We have to mean it.

Theologian Douglas John Hall wrote a little book I refer to often, called *Why Christian: For Those on the Edge of Faith*. In it, he argues that instead of asking the question, “are you saved?” we ought to ponder a deeper set of questions – what are we saved from and for what are we saved. And here he writes,

The most fundamental meaning of the word [salvation] itself . . . is a very earthy thing: the healing of persons, the reintegrating of divided selves, the reuniting of people with those from whom they are estranged, equipping us for the kind of life our Creator intended us to have.²

Saved for a life abundant. A life in community with others who call out the very best in ourselves. When that happens we can say, along with the Apostle Paul, “by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain” (1 Cor 15:10).

Through the grace of God we are gathered and called to do wondrous things to carry out the ministry of Jesus. No excuses that we aren’t good enough to respond to God’s call, no excuses that God needs more qualified people. No excuses – just grace. Grace that forgives any of our faults. Grace that is a great equalizer. Grace that allows

us to hear God's love and forgiveness. There is indeed a sweet sound of grace. If you listen closely, you may just hear it.

Through grace you might hear a divine sounding voice, saying, "I know who you are -- and I love you. I know all that you have done -- and I forgive you. I know your faults and failings -- and I still need you. Follow me."

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch, like me. May it be so. Here and among us. Amen.

¹ My memory of alternate wordings for the line "a wretch like me" were confirmed through an entry on wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazing_Grace which further reminded me of the Kathleen Norris quote. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York, Riverhead Books, 1998) 166.

² Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian: For Those On the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1998) 58.