

Celebrating Grace

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Bethesda, Maryland

At the end of this sermon we will sing the hymn “Amazing Grace.” The author of this hymn, John Newton, was a slave trader. On a voyage between Africa and the southern United States, John Newton suddenly became convinced that what he was doing was evil, sinful. He spent the rest of his life preaching against the evils of slavery. Newton wrote the hymn in 1779 as an autobiographical statement:

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.

John Newton also wrote his own epitaph:

John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the Faith he had long labored to destroy.

In the 1980s, when Unitarian Universalists were surveyed, there was overwhelming support for including the hymn “Amazing Grace” in a new hymnal. However, there was a problem with one

part of the hymn. One half of Unitarian Universalists surveyed said that they hated the phrase “saved a wretch like me.”

“I’m NOT a wretch,” they said. The other half of Unitarian Universalists surveyed, said, “No problem. That is the way the hymn is written, and we like it. Don’t touch a word.” As a result when we sing “Amazing Grace!” At the end of this sermon, you will note that there is an alternative to wretch noted at the bottom of the page.

Yet central to the belief of the Plymouth settlers was the conviction that all human beings are sinners. The puritans believed that the story of Adam and Eve was literally true. Adam and Eve committed the sin of disobedience to God. Therefore human beings, the descendants of Adam and Eve, are born sinful. They believed that God will forgive our sins if human beings accept in their hearts that by his death Jesus atoned for all human sin. The puritans called God’s act of forgiveness, grace. It is a theology expressed in the words “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound saved a wretch like me.”

A famous quotation from the Puritan governor of Massachusetts, John Bradford, also shows a deep conviction that human beings are sinners. While watching criminals, whom prison guards were taking to the gallows, Bradford said: “There but for the grace of God, go I.”

Speaking only for myself, I can say that today theologically I am far away from my puritan ancestors. Today (with reason, science and love as my authorities) I have abandoned the old belief that I am a wretched sinner in need of God’s grace.

Still I think that grace is a marvelous word. It is easy to say, and for me it describes comfort, kindness and mercy. On Thanksgiving Day it describes a simple prayer before a meal.

Paul Tillich was a German Lutheran minister who escaped from Nazi Germany in 1933. In 1948 Tillich published a sermon in which he said all of us experience a feeling called estrangement—the feeling of being separated from ourselves, from other people, from the world, from God.

Tillich used the idea of universal estrangement to understand the biblical idea of sin. He wrote:

Sin is separation. To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation. . . . We know that we are estranged from something to which we really belong, and with which we should be united. We know that the fate of separation is not merely a natural event . . . but that it is an experience in which we actively participate, in which our whole personality is involved. Separation constitutes the meaning of the word sin. It is this which is the state of our entire existence, from its very beginning to its end.¹

In other words, we are not all born bad, or evil or sinful. However, humans are born separated, alienated from the natural world. For Tillich the theologian, the problem of human sin is separation; he said that sin arises out of isolation, aloneness, and estrangement.

If sin stands for separation, then grace begins when we no longer feel separated from ourselves. Grace begins when we start to trust and respect ourselves. When we feel this acceptance for ourselves, then we can begin to extend these feelings to other people, to

Tillich, Paul, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1948, p. 154-5

accept them and to feel acceptance from and toward what Tillich called the Ground of Being.

In this sense grace is central to our well-being, central to our spiritual health.

- Picture a woman who is unable to find a job in the midst of national prosperity. Imagine a moment after the anger and the depression when she takes a bite out of an apple, and sister herself: “There is still joy in my life. Joy in the taste of this sweet fruit.” This is a moment of grace.
- Visualize a man whose skin has been scarred by illness. Imagine that moment of overcoming the loss of self-esteem, when he gets a hug from a friend, and he thinks to himself: “I am all right, just the way I am.” This is a moment of grace.
- Envision a young person whose parents are angry with her for failing in school. Imagine that moment of overcoming the sense of failure when her parents say to her we still love you we will always love you. And the young person thinks to herself: “I have not been perfect, but I am trying to do the best I can. I may not be a great student but I am still a good person.” This is a moment of grace.
- See in your mind’s eye a person who is depressed by the changes in his body as he has grown older. Imagine that moment when he transcends the loss of youth, and says to the face in the mirror: “I am not young and vigorous but I accept myself for whom I am.” This is a moment of grace.

In my own experience, support from other people often helps me reach this sense of grace. I experience a sense of estrangement because of my own imperfections. The support I receive from

others helps me come to grips with my own self-doubt. My friends and family help me to assess realistically who I am, to face my mistakes, and to learn to accept myself. This act of self-acceptance is grace. Once I can accept myself, the support I receive from others can help me to forgive and accept others from whom I have become estranged. This forgiveness is also grace. I am thankful to my friends, colleagues and family, for the moments of grace that come from their help and support.

Also, music, poetry, and the visual arts create in me a feeling of self acceptance. The sounds of music enter my ear, vibrate through my body and heal my soul. The colors of a painting enter my eyes and stir my heart. The words of a poem enter my brain and stimulate my mind. I am thankful to the poets, painters, performers and composers for the mysterious moments of grace created by their art.

The beauty of nature contributes to my feeling of self acceptance. The smells of a wood fire on a cold day, the beauty of a deer walking in the woods gives me a feeling of peace and acceptance. As the poet says “For a time, I rest in the grace of the world and am free.”

Thanksgiving is a festival of gratitude for the gifts of grace. At the time of the harvest I give thanks for the grace that is everywhere. I think of the prayer of a child:

“Dear God take care of daddy, mommy, brother, and sister, uncles, and aunts, grandpa, and grandma; and please God, do take care of yourself, or else we are all sunk.”

It is a way of saying “Thanks for everything.”

Of course life has its dark side. I maintain a sense of realism about the world and a sense of humility about myself. Authentic

acceptance of other people and the world comes with the realization that humans are sometimes cruel to each other. Nature can be destructive as well as beautiful. Terrible accidents happen.

Nevertheless, there are still moments of unity when the separateness disappears—moments of grace. When we watch the sunrise over the trees, when a small child gives us a warm smile, when we harvest our vegetables from the garden we planted in the spring, when we sing together in the darkness of the night; these can be moments of grace.

Paul Tillich himself was not a perfect man. After he died, his wife Hanna visited the theological school I was attending in California. She had published a personal account of the many problems they had in their marriage. We sat on the steps of the school one sunny afternoon, three or four students studying for the ministry and the wife of this famous theologian.

In response to a question she said, “Paulus had difficulty talking about his feelings. So instead he transformed his personal experiences into the abstractions of his sermons. He never talked directly about his fear of death, his lust for life, his feelings of inadequacy; but it was all there in abstraction in his sermons.” As she talked, I remembered a passage from the writings of her husband, the famous theologian. I wonder what personal experiences were behind it. Tillich wrote:

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our

hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps later you will find it. . . . Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!" If this happens to us we experience grace.²

This Thanksgiving season my wish for you is that you will feel accepted, accepted by yourself, by your family and by this church.

May grace be with you.

Tillich, Paul, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1948, p. 161-2

