

Guest pastor Jay Blackwell presented this sermon on Sunday, 19 June 2005, in Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts.

Amazing Grace

WHEN I WAS 16, my parents purchased a Chevette for \$1,500 in cash. My Dad only pays for his cars in cash. To this day, my Dad does not have a car note- never has, never will. The car was a four door, blue stick shift and I was incredibly proud of this car. What a gift for a sixteen year-old!!!

One Saturday, a mere week after purchase, I drove to Dunkin Donuts (yes, they have them below the Mason Dixon line) and was returning home. I was making a left-hand turn and in the middle of the turn, the clutch shattered, leaving me the target of the on-coming car. After the crash and the shock of what happened, I got out and set on the curb. I still remember the terror I felt in thinking of having to call my Dad and tell him the car was totaled. I begged the McKnight's, members of our church who witnessed the wreck, to not call my Dad for a few minutes, but they would not listen.

My Dad arrived, saw me blubbing for all I was worth and sat down beside me. What happened next surprised me beyond my wildest dreams. He simply said, "Well, we prayed for a child and God gave us you. We prayed for a car and God gave us the car. I am just glad God chose to take the car. Let's go home. It will all be okay."

Now, while I don't agree with my Dad's theology expressed in the moment, the theological implications of choosing grace over judgment in response to the situation have always had an impact on me. It reminds me of an old song written by Dottie Rambo, a Christian songwriter entitled, "He Looked Beyond My Fault, and Saw My Need":

Amazing Grace, shall always be my song of praise.
For it was grace that brought me liberty,
I do not know, just why He came to love me so.
He looked beyond my fault and saw my need.

The ability to look beyond fault and to see the need in ourselves, in those we love, and in the world at large is the call to Amazing Grace. It is so natural to place blame and to hide behind excuses. However, we are called to stay current in our relationships and to live openly and to "walk in the light". It is difficult to stay current and to live honestly when we lose sight of the grace that surrounds us, that holds us, and

that streams through the cracks in our lives allowing the love of God to penetrate our world.

How do we understand and how do we experience grace today? I think of it in terms of this statement: "You are accepted." You and I are accepted, fully and totally by God, now and always, without condition, without deserving, without question. To be accepted in this way means to be cherished and to be loved.

It means that who we basically are is valued, honored and respected. It means that we don't have to earn or deserve such care; it is simply there for us as a gift outright. The grace of God is given to us at God's initiative. It is an expression of God's love for us and of God's unconditional acceptance.

The author Frederick Buechner, in his book *Wishful Thinking*, puts it this way:

"The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too. . . . Grace is something you can never get, it only be given."

Stated another way, grace arrives unannounced in lives that least expect or deserve it.

So what is our response to this grace? Do we take this unmerited favor, this boundless love, this tremendous gift from God and run amuck by living our lives recklessly? If there is nothing I can do to earn the love of God or for you to lose the love of God, are you and I free from a responsibility to live rightly? Our text today states it clearly. God forbid!!! I have always loved this verse for that particular phrase.

Our freedom to chose is the most unique gift given to us by God. This freedom to choose our own way must also include the possibility of choosing poorly. It is a daily choice which requires us to stay current and honest with our selves and with each other. Because you and I do not always choose the most graceful path, we have ended up in some miserable, blind alleys along the way. Like the hymn says,

"Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come;

Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, And grace will
lead me home."

Will we continue to make wrong choices from time to time? Yes; we are not perfect. However, it is God's grace that prompts us to repent, to come home to our true selves, to be the person and people of God that we are called to be. The Shaker hymn, Tis A Gift To be Simple says that we "turn, turn, til we come round right".

Each day you and I have the opportunity to accept grace for ourselves, and to offer it to those around us. We have the ability to look beyond fault and to see need in our own lives and in others. Over time, our accepting and offering of grace will make us whole, both personally and communally. As Christians we are called to be an extension of the life of Christ by, creating new honest, current relationships; redeeming broken and wounded relationships; and sustaining and nurturing on-going relationships around us.

How will we end terrorism, poverty, war crimes and genocide in the world? How will we end domestic violence, divorce, homelessness and hate crimes in Marshfield? By looking beyond fault and seeing need. We will hold each other responsible for our choices; we will accept grace for ourselves, offering grace to those around us, who will in faith offer it to those around them till it spreads to the world at large.

Donald McCollough sums it up best in his book, "If Grace is So Amazing, Why Don't We Like It?: How God's Radical Love Turns the World Upside Down".

"Grace, then, whether we like it or not, is the central theme of the Christian faith. It is the innermost truth of all that will abide. This grace, when at last it takes hold of us and leaves us no choice but to acknowledge it, turns everything upside down."

Grace alone has the power to change people for the better. Only in the capacious freedom of having already been accepted can people own their failures and walk down another path. Grace alone grants the courage to face wrong-doing; grace alone grants the ability to keep things in perspective, to see failure as only one thread in the larger tapestry of life; grace alone grants the strength to rise up with the confidence to face a new future."

My church family, may we face our wrong-doing, may we keep things in perspective and make we continue making the quilt of our lives and of our congregation.

Benediction

As you leave today may you know that God decided that you'd be home free before you were born, and that you'd be found before you had a chance to get lost. This is the good news. We have come in to worship, now let us go out to serve by sharing this same message.