

W Thomas – 22nd Pentecost Sermon

St Paul's Episcopal Church, Edenton NC 10/24/21

(Sung) Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now was blind, but now I see. Wow, we have singers at 8 o'clock.

You won't tell anybody. I begin with that first famous, well-known, by just about everybody, verse from the John Newton-inspired and written Amazing Grace. John Newton, a slave ship captain in the late 18th century.

John Newton, who found redemption in his faith journey, hard redemption. Became a priest of the Church of England. Became an abolitionist.

Became one dedicated to upending that which brought him to his knees so that others could see his own faith journey. If you've ever seen the movie Amazing Grace with Albert Finney and Ioan Gruffudd, you'll see a fairly good rendition, but you'll get a real insight into the character of John Newton. Now, why do I bring up John Newton? Why do I bring up Amazing Grace? Well, it's nice that blind can see.

That gives me my subtle connection to blind Bartimaeus. And I had to wonder, as John Newton was going through his dark phases of trying to claim Jesus as Savior and Lord, trying to find a faith journey that would bring him to wholeness, did he not think about, as maybe when he wrote this particular verse or this hymn, he started to think about the blind man, Bartimaeus, coming forward and saying, can my sight be restored? I would like to see again. So that's my subtle connection to Bartimaeus.

But I need to give you a small premise to work with, which is just an awkward thing to say, but it makes some sense. Justice is getting what you deserve. Mercy, which Bartimaeus cries out for, this is where it's awkward, is not getting what you deserve.

And then there's grace. Grace is getting what you don't deserve. Now, as we start to unpack this passage of scripture with Bartimaeus, he's been sitting by the side of the road.

He's been blind long enough to wear the type of coat that beggars wear to identify him in his role in society, no matter how they think about his blindness or castigate him for some kind of ill, because that's how things were thought of way back when. So you have Bartimaeus there, and then all of a sudden he hears

Jesus, and he's crying out, and the only words he understands are to say, have mercy on me. I need to change.

Can you please do something? I've heard about you. That's about as good as it gets. And the crowd is basically, stay back until Jesus, who is open to so much, think of the woman who touches the hem of his garment and is aware of all things, calls him and says, and then it's like the crowd gets nice.

I've wondered why the commentators all think that that was like this big shift. So I'm not going to go there, but it's fascinating to think about that. I'm more impressed with the four that brought the paralytic to Jesus and lowered him through the roof out of their own faith.

So I like that group from Luke's past better. But here we have the moment when, did you listen to this? This is such a great piece of imagery. Jesus calls him forward, and the way the translation is, he throws his cloak off, and he springs up.

Can't wait to get there. And then Jesus does what Jesus often does. He says, what do you want? Isn't it interesting? It could be painfully obvious to Jesus what he wants.

He's got the cloak, which expresses what he's been doing. He's probably wobbling. And he gives him an opportunity to claim what his heart's desire is.

Now, this is where the grace part comes in, and this is where I want to be careful in how we sometimes think of everything as a transaction, because we're a highly transactional people. We look at our bank accounts. We look at, well, even in Jesus' time, what part of the table you want to sit at, you want to sit at the higher level, or you'll get pushed down.

That's a transaction. Who's this poor person you let into my feast? Kick her out, stuff like that. You can see the transactional nature.

Is there, like, a deal being made to heal Barnabas? Remember, justice is getting what you deserve. And by the way, be careful with that one. If justice is getting what you deserve, you automatically think you're getting the right punishment.

But if you connect the word justice to shalom, as I preached on a few weeks ago, shalom, the richness and fullness of all that God has given you, maybe justice is getting the richness and fullness of all that God has given you, all the fullness of life. So mercy, not getting what you deserve. Did he deserve to lose

his sight? And so then there's grace, getting what you don't deserve, meaning you cannot earn grace.

Freely given. There's nothing you can do to earn it. And remember, you hear, where the transaction piece comes in in this passage of Scripture is, your faith has made you well.

So a cursory reading could be, gee, he came forward, gave Jesus faith, Jesus gave him his sight. And if it was that easy, or if it worked that way, how would we answer so many other questions in the world? Because I don't think that's the right place for us to focus on. And if John Newton was here, John Newton would be very clear to say, it can't possibly be that.

Because when I decided not to be a slaver, I still ran slave ships. It took me a number of years before I could finally let that go, even though I had some modicum of faith. I understood and I believed.

I couldn't live fully into my belief. I needed something greater. So maybe his understanding of when the grace came, while it says in the great poem, at first I believed, but the dawning of the depth of grace that could help him amend and change his life, the mercy shown to him that brought him to being able to understand that which was freely given to him is the huge piece that falls into all of this.

I really wish when they chose the passages of Hebrew, the letter to the Hebrews that you got to read today, they knew I was going to preach on the John Newton passage in my mind. There's no John Newton scripture, but I was going to use Amazing Grace as a kickoff. Because then the passage from Hebrews would have said, faith, this great definition, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Is it possible that when Bartimaeus sprung up and threw his cloak off, he was living in to faith is the conviction of things hoped for, but not seen. He didn't know if anything was going to happen. He wasn't trading anything.

He was just being open. Open to whatever God would give him. Justice, mercy, or did he even know about the nature of grace? Here's a connection for us.

Did you just see how my hands are held? This is called the Orans position. Did you ever notice your priest doing this at the altar when I pray the Eucharistic prayer on our behalf? This is theoretically as defenseless a position as you can possibly be in when you stand before somebody else. When you stand before, truly, the greater power.

And when I am in this position, I am saying, Lord, bless us with your grace. And as we say in our prayers, Lord, have mercy. So my hope is through these witnesses that have gone before that are presented to us this day, Bartimaeus, who was able to remember that he could say to Jesus what was deep in his heart, you can do that as well.

He got the answer he wanted. We always get the answer we need. Sometimes it's not the one we want, but it's the answer that says I love you and I am with you in and through all things, which I believe is the answer John Newton got.

And John Newton is the stronger example for me personally of one who understands that faith is the conviction of things hopeful and things not seen. For in his life, they did become seen. And God used him powerfully to be a witness to change the world and upend something totally horrible.

Now, not each and every one of us are going to be asked that much, but our faith will lead us to places where we least expect God to be, but need God most. And I think that's one of the reasons why we all like to sing Amazing Grace. So let's close with that.

(Sung) Amazing grace, how sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me I once was lost But now was found But now I see.

All these words we offer in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.