

## **W Thomas – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - Christ Episcopal Church, Elizabeth City NC 10-05-25**

I have a saying that first occurred to me when I needed something about 20 years ago to finish off an email. And it just kind of fell off my fingers and must have been from God because it said, may the blessing of God find you when you least expect it and need it most. And in many ways, I realize that's another connection to the story of John Newton.

John Newton is the one who helps make, for me, some of the words that the Apostle Paul lives so true. The Apostle Paul, who a few weeks ago claimed himself to be a man of violence, and we looked at that. And then today in his letter to Timothy, he has some very good words.

But before we get his words that he says to Timothy, let me remind you about John Newton. We just sang *Amazing Grace*. He is the author of that.

That is a powerful hymn from the 1700s when he was a redeemed person. He wrote that as a pastor of a church. But before that, he had grown up in a Christian household, but his mother died when he was young.

And I guess his response to the world at that point was to go off, and as you'll hear in his epitaph, he led a rather riotous life, dissolute life, and that led him into earning a living as the captain of a slave ship, ships that would take slaves from Africa to points where they would have unbearable life. And we could go at depth to that type of slavery. But he also, as his life went on, he helped become one of the ones, again, in the blessing of God, the grace of God, the amazing grace, found him that he helped become one of the proponents that ended slavery.

And if you want to really watch a great impact movie, we have a copy in our library, *Amazing Grace*, with Owen Griffith and Albert Finney playing John Newton. So there's another place to go. So in John Newton's own words, the words that he had put on his tombstone when he died in about 1808, right after having been an important part of making sure that Parliament ended slavery, he had written a pamphlet in 1788 called *Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade*.

But here he is at the end of his life, and he's put these words on his tombstone, his summation. They help set the stage for when I read the words from Paul's lips, with the thought that just maybe John Newton, upon hearing those words, may have found his way to that blessing of God. So the tombstone, 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, hardened, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy.

That is quite the testament at that point at the end of his life. Now, the words that Paul writes that I sensed as I was reading it and preparing for today are this, as he writes to Timothy. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me, his prisoner, but join me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace.

And then Paul goes on and speaks more about grace in 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy. So we find our touchstone with him with amazing grace. So if I was to give you an idea of what I think I'm preaching about, I'll say this.

This sermon wonders if the words of the Apostle Paul, shared with Timothy, could have been part of the moment the slaver John Newton moved from infidel and libertine to eventually become priest and give us the truth of amazing grace. How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. Now, it is such a common hymn, but you have to remember that it's been sung for hundreds and hundreds of years, most likely in this building and other buildings preceding this, as part of our Elizabeth City Christ Church worship experience.

There are other hymns in our hymnal. There's two more of them that Newton wrote that may have also been part of people getting concurrent with his own witness. Remember, he was 40 years a priest in the Church of England.

So he was clearly one who was out there trying to find the best way to let others know the good news that he had finally found, that in many ways, he could say, I'm not worthy to do that. One of my touch points with amazing grace has to do with the way he wrote the opening line. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

Now, I have to tell you, there was a period of time, and this is after ordination as a priest. And you have to remember, when you're ordained a priest, you've gone through a lot of training. And sometimes your head gets a little filled with nonsense.

And you have to work your way through some of it at times. And so one moment, I was looking at amazing grace, a wretch like me, and I went, I don't think I'm wretched. I don't like the word wretch.

That doesn't give me any sense of self-worth. So I think what I'll do, amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a fool like me. And all I can hear in the back of my head right now is when I first thought of that, God laughing.

So you have to realize, sure, I was being a fool by not paying attention to what grace is. Grace is unmerited. You're never worthy of it.

It is given to you. And this wretched, this wretched is the easiest way that we have to say we can turn away from God. It wasn't turning towards the choir in any other way.

He just happened to be there. And it's the turning away from God. And the word wretched is actually as accurate a way for Newton to let everybody know his own state as an invitation to remember how easy it is for us to recognize that same state for ourselves when we try to do, dare I say, foolish radiations as I tried to do.

When I came to the moment where I could fully embrace amazing grace, it was a liberating moment, perhaps not as strong as Newton's, but one that certainly suited me well. And as we are living in to the wisdom of John Newton, he has his hymnody that he gives us. We sang amazing grace.

But there are two other hymns here in our hymnal. Hymn number 644 starts off. And it is concurrent to the time frame.

It sounds like this.

*(sung) How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear. It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds, and drives away our fear.*

So hymn 644, there's another great bit of wisdom that would have been infused in congregations. And we probably sang that one as well. And then this is one that we often sing on our way out from church.

I'm not sure. I'm going to try to do the first verse. If I hit the high note at the end, that'll be a blessing.

We'll see where it goes. But you know this one.

*(sung) Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God. He whose word cannot be broken, born thee for his own abode. On the rock of angels' fountains, who can shake the sure repose? With salvation's walls surrounded, thou may smile at all thy foes.*

Gee, may the blessing of God find you when you least expect it and need it most.

I didn't hit that note at 8 o'clock. But you have to realize, you look at both the author of the words and the authors of the tune. Concurrent to the time, think of the generation upon generations that have been influenced by the power of John Newton's life, his own conversion, his testimony to what it is to have that notion and that willingness to receive amazing grace.

You see, the point is to receive it and then be a participant in sharing it. So I'll leave you with Newton's own quote about his life that goes beyond, I think, what he said in his tombstone. It's this quote.

I am not the man I ought to be. I am not the man I wish to be. But by the grace of God, I am not the man I used to be.

My hope is that as we walk through our lives this week and we apprehend and notice the grace of God floating in our lives that sometimes we miss, we realize how God's love is so strong that we are not who we used to be, but we are more who God created us to be. That's amazing grace.

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