

Lent 4A March 22 2020
John 9:1-41
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Amazing grace and peace to you from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one true God, now and for ever. Amen.

When interrogating the man who had formerly been blind, the Pharisees say about Jesus, *"Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner."* He answers, *"I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."* Let's pray:

Scoundrel, villain, rogue, swine, good-for-nothing, wretch... child of God, pastor, author of the most wonderful hymn, *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound*; John Newton. I wonder how many people had decided that he was good for nothing, beyond hope, and given up on him. I wonder how long it took for them to believe that he really had changed. How long did he have to "walk as a child of the light" before those who knew him before, stopped thinking that it was an act, that he was only doing what he did because of what he hoped to gain.

John Newton, after that night on a sinking ship, knew that he was a wretch in need of a Saviour—and he knew that he had been saved only by the amazing grace of God. He was once blind, but now he sees, healed by amazing grace. So too, for the blind man in today's gospel; so too, for you and me.

Grace, amazing grace. It's the first thing I forget and then turn around and see the power of every day. Grace has changed my life so profoundly that, well, it's all I want to talk about today, every day, really.

First, grace is our origin; it's our source code.

In the beginning, all that existed was God. So, in order to bring the world into being, God had to kind of move over. God chose to take up less space, to make room. God wanted to share - like the kindly gentleman on the bus who stands and offers his seat to another. He doesn't have to do it, but that's just who he is. The kindly gentleman's nature is predisposed to making room for others.

Then God's creativity exploded and he made animals. Sea creatures. Birds of the air. Wild animals of the earth.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." Let *us*. So, God the community, God the family, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God the opposite of isolation, said, "Let us make humanity in our image and likeness."

God created every one of us, male and female, in the image of God. God gave us God's own image—something so holy that even when broken, it can always be resurrected; reconciled; redeemed. An origin and destination. Grace is our genetic source code.

Second, there's good news and bad news.

In order to really talk about grace, we must understand why grace is needed. Which means we have to talk about sin—even if reductionists tend to think that talking about sin equates to celebrating low self-esteem or “making mistakes.” But, how can we ever understand why grace is amazing if we think we don't need it?

For example, a free lifetime supply of Ventolin is only good news if you happen to have asthma, yes? The problem with the word sin is that it's too often used as a synonym for being immoral. But you could live an entirely upright life, never cheat on your spouse or the ATO, never break a law and be considered a "good person", and yet, remain a sinner.

In fact, the word sin has been so misused that I'm grateful for this little acronym I came across; "HPSTU:" The "human propensity to stuff things up." The human propensity to stuff things up can't be avoided. Don't be fooled into thinking that with enough therapy or meditation retreats, or with enough wokeness or with the right diet or with good enough intentions, that you will not still stuff things up. But also, friends, you need not despair because...

Third, you are indeed a mighty sinner, but shame is optional.

Martin Luther, in a letter he wrote to Philip Melanchthon, told his friend, "If you are a preacher of grace then preach a true, not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners," he wrote. So be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here, we have to sin. So pray boldly — for you are a mighty sinner," he wrote.

While it can be healthy and useful to have regret about the ways you stuff things up, and to even make amends, you needn't have shame about it because put simply, if we didn't stuff things up, we wouldn't need God. We wouldn't need God's gift of grace. There wouldn't be any room for him.

Which brings me to...

Fourth, feel free to name your sins.

It's how we move over and make room for God. Don't think of grace as being when God is good enough to forgive you for your failings, rather, as when God is a source of wholeness, redemption, and healing which is infinitely more powerful than your failings.

Grace, to me, is God's DNA. Grace is the spirit's perpetually renewable resource. And confession of sins isn't the way we earn forgiveness—it's just the way we force our egos into a posture where we can receive forgiveness.

Fifth, grace and gratitude.

When I forget about the grace all around me, I start to feel entitled to all the good things in my life. But how could I have caused God to move over and make room for me? To be a living being on this glorious Earth is itself grace. But what did I do that God would knit me together in my mother's womb? How could I earn the right to eat a juicy mango? That God even thought to make the mango is grace to me. Think about honey. Honey is grace in a jar, a sweetness entirely given that we've done absolutely nothing to deserve.

Sixth, when we experience grace, we become more compassionate.

And this world needs more compassion. Once you become aware, and I mean consciously process that you've received grace and mercy, you become wary about deciding who the so-called 'deserving poor' are. When we see how God's amazing grace redeems our HPSTU, we tend to give other people a break. We stop holding others to a ridiculous standard. We believe God can make beautiful things, even out of other people's HPSTU.

But to be clear...

Seventh, faith isn't about self-improvement.

For it to really be about grace, it can't be about us and our efforts and our intentions and our goodness. Without grace, there's pride and temporarily getting things right, quickly followed by despair and inevitably stuffing things up again.

Because God isn't interested in making you a better person. God is interested in making you a new person. Because if this whole thing was only a matter of self-improvement, then trying harder should do the trick, in which case, we basically don't need Jesus anymore. Being better people – being “good-er” Samaritans is something we can do on our own. But to become new people we need God. To become new people, we need a God who daily drowns our old dying selves in the watery grave of baptism and raises us to new life. To be new people, we need a God who has conquered death, by death. A God who offers us a way where there is no way. Becoming new people is what this whole Jesus discipleship thing is about and it doesn't happen through trying harder to be good. It comes by being robbed— robbed of our old ideas about ourselves, robbed of our self-sufficiency, robbed of our piety.

Finally, it's grace that sweet Holy Spirit intercedes for us. It's grace that our prayers are welcomed by the Creator. It's grace to hear each other's prayers and to make them our own. Every day that an alcoholic or addict is clean and sober—that's grace. The sun rising in the east every day is grace. There's nothing I could do to pull that ball of fire up over the horizon.

It's grace that God would make his home in the womb of a virgin from Palestine. It's grace that God would hang out, see what it's like to have a body that aches and a mother that loves, bread that nourishes and sunrises that stun, friends that console and friends that betray — and be under an empire that persecutes. God saw what all of that was like and said now is the time of salvation and opened his arms wide on the cross and welcomed every horrible thing that our human propensity to stuff things up could do, and responded with... forgiveness. That's grace. Amazing grace.

It's grace that God would again and again move over and make room for our hearts and hurts and prayers and say to us, "You are mine and you are enough."

Ultimately, my dear friends, there is only grace. Everything else is a measure of worthiness. Everything else leads to insiders and outsiders. Everything else fails us. Although John Newton, at the end of his life, was physically blind and unable to see, spiritually his eyes had been opened years earlier, by the amazing grace of God. Grace so powerful that it can save a wretch like me and make blind humanity, see. Amen.

And the grace of God, that defies all human attempts to understand it, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.