

Paul's words in Ephesians 2:1-10 emphasize GRACE. "Amazing Grace" is a favorite Christian song, used especially at moments of turmoil or tragedy. Its original title, by Rev. John Newton, was "Faith's Review and Expectation," since it has verses that look back and also forward. The song tells of a sinful present or past, and a future filled with mercy and promise. One of the most memorable renderings recently was sung by President Obama at the funeral of Rev. Pinckney, pastor of a black church in Charleston South Carolina. As you may recall, a 21 year old young man, Dylann Roof, with social media posts about white supremacy said he came to "kill some black people," and did kill nine. They were at Bible study and prayer. Perhaps the closest synonym to Grace is "Mercy," so that any expression of forgiveness is a from of Grace. Reportedly, the families of those slain in that Charleston church spoke words of forgiveness toward the young man whose mind was filled with murderous hate.

Incredible Forgiveness, Amazing Grace, is in the story of John Newton who wrote the text of the song. We recall that John Newton of England, was captain of a slave ship. He had joined his father's voyages to Africa at 11 years old learning how to capture and sell slaves at a young age. In 1748, during a violent storm at sea, John Newton was reading "*The Imitation of Christ*" by Thomas a Kempis, a Dutch monk. Naturally, he realized how inhumane, how anti-Christ were the practices of capturing, and putting blacks in chains. His heart was converted to the Way of Christ, and later he became a Christian preacher in the Anglican church. He wrote the words for his own tombstone: "John Newton, slave trader, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy." Newton worked the rest of his life to abolish slavery, and perhaps it was not a coincidence that the year of his death, 1807 was the very year that the British Parliament abolished slavery (ahead of us by half a century!)

Yes, Grace IS Amazing, how the mercy and forgiveness of God can change a life, can change one from violent slave trader to spokesperson forgiving ways of Christ. John Newton's story echoes the story of the Apostle Paul. We know that Paul was a murderer of Christians. He would "round them up" and bring them in chains to the authorities in Rome. After the Risen Christ confronts him, first blinding him with light, Paul, forgiven and redeemed, becomes the primary spokesperson for Christ and the Christian Way. Grace can be utterly amazing in its power to turn a life around: John Newton the slave trader, Paul the murderer of Christians, and hopefully Dylann Roof, murderer of black neighbors at prayer.

We have to disabuse ourselves of the superior notion that the Old Testament is all about law and the New Testament is all about grace. Love and Mercy are close synonyms for Grace, and there are surely many words of Love and Mercy in the Hebrew scriptures... "surely goodness and Mercy will follow all the days of my life (the famous Psalm 23)".... Or "The Lord is Merciful and Gracious, slow to anger (many Psalm references). The God of the Psalms is full of "steadfast Love," which is ultimately compassion/mercy/forgiveness. King David relied heavily on God's mercy/grace in his prayer of Psalm 51. Like John Newton's trading of slaves or Paul's murdering of Christians, King David had stolen Uriah's wife Bathsheba and then sent Uriah to the front lines (to be killed). He prays in Psalm 51, "Have Mercy on me O God, according to thy steadfast love.... Wash me thoroughly and cleanse me from my sin...Restore to me the joy of they salvation." Grace is the experience of restoration, of finding new peace and joy. It is available to all with a "broken and contrite heart" as King David goes on to say. This is the universal sense or experience of Grace. When the gospel of John testifies that Jesus was "full of grace and truth," I believe we can say that the Spirit of Christ, the "Universal Christ" (to borrow a phrase from Richard Rohr) is present, wherever there is genuine Grace and Truth.

Yes, Grace is so amazing that it can turn lives around. Yet Grace does not have emphasize sin; Grace is affirming the flawed nature of humans, affirming that we are imperfect, capable of many mistakes, so that we live by means of Grace, confident that we are meant to grow and learn from our mistakes!

Grace is also the experience of being loved, received as a “free gift.” Receiving love, mercy or forgiveness as a GIFT is the experience of Grace. Often we used the words “unmerited” or “undeserved:” Grace is a gift we did not work for, something we did not earn. Freely given acts of kindness are examples of Grace.

If we look again at Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus, we easily find references to a Universal Grace, an omnipresent Grace, available to all. Paul speaks of the “immeasurable riches of God’s grace, in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.” If God is so rich in mercy and love, the same God was at work in the people of Israel and at work in all peoples on this earth. We testify that we have seen this great mercy/love/grace divinely in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and can receive it from him in his risen Spirit. Yet we also can believe that his eternal Spirit can also incarnate in souls that are not intentionally followers of Jesus and the gospel writings. GRACE is so amazing or universal that surely God’s grace can reach into all hearts and minds in many ways!)

God’s grace as a universal experience, can be as simple as using “gracious” (kind) words with others, hearing gracious words from others. Mr. Rogers incarnated divine grace with children letting them know that they were indeed special, created uniquely by God. Words of kindness, words of affirmation are so needed to “save” this world which has so many words that are judgmental, mean, and threatening. As a universal experience, we all have most likely benefitted from or offered “gracious” hospitality. My mother and her dear friend Lois were both amazing creators of birthday or holiday

dinners for their friends, often including those with very little family. Just as Love, “isn’t love until you give it away,” the *real experience* of Christ’s grace is more important than getting the right words or studies about Grace... so I better wind down with my thoughts!

The great German Reformer Martin Luther, emphasized Pauls words that we are “saved by GRACE.” He also said that MUSIC is a key vehicle of God’s grace. Thus, using synonyms well, we could actually be “saved by music” or “*healed* by music! Recall how King David sang psalms for restoration, and recall our own “healing concerts” in the fall. Luther said: “Music is a gift and grace of God. The Devil, the originator of anxieties and troubles, flees before the sound of music... I would allow no man to preach or teach God’s people without a proper knowledge of the use and power of sacred song.” Luther composed both the words and music to the famous hymn “A Might Fortress is our God” based on Psalm 46.

Funny you should ask... does this preacher have a particular song that might go along with this sermon? I almost didn’t have one, but reading up on Martin Luther made me realize that I also wrote a song based on Psalm 46... the ending part about “being still.” Then I added more images about still waters, and Jesus giving us rest. My brother insisted it is the central song of my first album, and Area Minister Erv Bode, a Belleville Church member, said I should sing it every Sunday for prayer time. So I will close with this little prayer song, that to me speaks of God’s Grace; Grace is something we RECEIVE, so it helps to be in a quiet, receptive mood! In quietness, in meditation, we can think of the God of “refuge and strength,” and of Christ who “gives us rest,” and of the Holy Spirit who “lives in us.”

Be still and know that I am God... Follow me beside the waters still.... Come to Me and I will give you rest... Live in Me and I will live in you... Be still and know... Be still.... just be.