

Amazing Grace

sermon digest

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2 Corinthians 8:1-9

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One of the most popular legacies of Bill Moyer's years in public television was his 1990 program on the power and influence of the enduring English Christian hymn "Amazing Grace." The hymn was written by John Newton, a former slave trader whose radical conversion experience during a storm at sea turned his life completely around, first to leave the slave trade, then to seek ordination in the Church of England, finally as a crusader against the slave trade. Composed around the time of the American Revolution, the tune NEW BRITAIN is usually called an American Folk Melody; but some speculate that it may have originated with slaves on board Newton's ship. Moyers' program explored the mystique of the hymn through numerous settings, some from ethnic grassroots sources and others from professional entertainers, and focused on the transforming power of the hymn in the lives people, including alcoholics and convicts.

In a 2004 speech before the Society of American Journalists, Moyers recalled the 1990 program and "the miracle that empowered a one-time slave trader to write the hymn, 'Amazing Grace.'" If you know anything about Moyers, you know that this one-time Baptist seminarian does not use the word *miracle* loosely. What is the miracle here? Newton's story in the background helps to explain the text, but long before I knew anything about the history or the author I was awed by the hymn. Perhaps it is the haunting melody that lends itself equally to choral arrangements, country-western whines, a capella sing-along, or bagpipes. The hymn seems to transcend church and theology to take on an almost secular air; but, while I love the melody and appreciate instrumental presentations of the hymn without words, I personally think the miracle is in the message.

Grace lies at the core of our faith. Grace is the word that we finally agreed belonged at the front of our identity as church. It is the dominant concept in Christian reflection of the generosity of God toward the world in creation and in salvation. After a long, long discussion, we finally agreed that we are together by the grace of God and that grace is at the core of our being and the central meaning of our life together as church. We are bound together by a covenant of Grace. We are Grace Covenant Church.

In the personal experience of John Newton, grace came with deliverance from a raging storm at sea. If it had stopped there, I would not be very impressed; but the experience transformed the man from a participant in the exploitation of vulnerable human cargo to become a political activist in opposition to the slave trade. Grace was not only the salvation of a "wretch like me"; it was the transformation of that wretch into the gift of life to the least of God's children. Grace, then, is far more than the abundance that we receive from God. Grace is fulfilled when we become a people of grace extending the gift of God to others. A gracious God empowers a gracious people. A generous God creates a generous church.

Grace is the word that lies at the center of Paul's appeal to Corinthian Christians to participate in the offering for Jerusalem brothers and sisters, who were in trouble. Without apology or defense, 2 Corinthians 8-9 is about money; it is an exhortation for Corinthian Christians to participate in an offering for the poor in Jerusalem. It could be legitimately called a fund-raiser. Here Paul is not primarily concerned with the usual stewardship issue of the Christian relationship to material things. He does not lecture on greed or shame the people for their affluence, either of which might apply. Neither does he take the spiritual high road of calling for a prayer meeting to ask God to come to the rescue. The crisis was financial. People in Jerusalem were suffering from an imposed poverty, probably from economic boycott and ostracism. Now, you have to be aware that some of these impoverished Christians in Jerusalem were probably on the side of the opposition in the controversy over allowing Gentiles to join the church. Paul never mentions the old debate. Rather he encourages Gentile Christians to take the high road, to provide a generous gift of money to help relieve their burden. The speculation here is irresistible. This is not a time for the Gentiles to nurse old wounds and begrudge opponents to Gentile presence in the church. It was time to demonstrate identity with Christ by giving to the "saints" in Jerusalem without regard to the controversy and without condition.

Notably missing in this fund-raising sermon is the imposition of guilt or any attempt to manipulate or to trick people into turning loose of money. Paul makes clear that he is not calling in his authority as an apostle, commanding the offering. He does not make any reference to the old legal standard of tithing that suggests a minimum payment for services rendered that must be met to satisfy the justice of God. He does not set a goal or suggest an amount. He does not preach a prosperity gospel that promises a return on the investment, suggesting that the offering is like a winning lottery ticket certain to bring untold wealth to the giver.

In the sermon doxology, final sentence, Paul provides some explanation of grace: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Corinth. 9:15) Grace leaves us speechless. The gift of God transcends the descriptive power of mere words. Grace must be understood through example.

Grace is modeled in the life of the church. Paul cites the example of Macedonian Christians. The Macedonians were

also Gentile Christians who could have begrudged the offering to Jerusalem. Perhaps Paul chose them as an example for two reasons. On the one hand, they could identify with the Corinthian Christians as Gentiles; but, on the other, they could identify with the Jerusalem church because they too had experienced poverty. They gave during a "severe ordeal of affliction."

The gift was generous. Paul never states the amount, just that "their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity." Perhaps they were like the widow Jesus observed in the Temple putting her "mite" in the offering box. Jesus applauded her gift as far beyond the loud rattling noise of the wealthy because she had given her all. These Christians gave according to their means and beyond their means.

The gift was personal. "They gave themselves first to the Lord." The priority here is right. The grace of giving is centered in the soul, the self. If I am committed to God, then all that I have is also committed to the Lord.

The gift was voluntary. It was not coerced or manipulated. They actually begged for the privilege in sharing in the ministry to the saints. That is the essential nature of faith. The only way anyone enters into the community of faith and the communion with God is by choice. The major distinction that Paul makes between *law* and *grace* in Romans is tied directly to the will. If we give because of legal duty or to satisfy the demand of God we have missed the point of grace altogether. Grace is unconditional love expressed in acts of generosity toward another.

The gift was its own reward. The entire focus here was on the need of the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. It was not a loan to get repaid with interest either from the recipients or from God. There was a joy in giving, a satisfaction in helping, that gives meaning to life. Giving is indeed a grace, a spiritual gift that all of us can exercise in the work of the gospel.

We humans are heavily dependent on learning by example. Memorizing words on paper or blindly obeying rules without meaning is robotic, not human. Grace happens when we get into the action, when we become mentors to one another, when we put our faith into action that we become not only the recipients of God's grace but the instruments of God's grace to a world in need.

The ultimate model is Christ. "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Although the sermon is about money and receiving an offering for the saints at Jerusalem, Fred Craddock believes that this is a theological statement about the work of Christ, not a financial statement about how much he had or gave up. The Incarnation of God in Christ was a costly act. In Philippians Paul speaks of *kenosis*, pouring out the privilege of being God for the sacrificial life of Christ in the flesh. Every act of love is a *kenosis*, a pouring out of self. Love can never be measured in monetary values.

That is why the promise here is not a prosperity gospel. We are made rich by his poverty as we are empowered to participate in his grace. Brueggemann concludes that Paul directs a stewardship campaign for the early church and presents Jesus as the new economist. "We say it takes money to make money. Paul says it takes poverty to produce abundance. Jesus gave himself to enrich others, and we should do the same."