

Words of Grace

Where do you hear words of grace? In the thick of balancing demands and juggling acts, it is easy to be convinced that balancing and juggling are not our strong suits, that we are always falling short of all we want and need to be. We confess it every week. All of us fall short of all that we intend to be and do and yes, all that God intends for us and through us. Not one of us is perfect. We all have our failings and our foibles. We grow impatient with a parent, irritable with a spouse, exhausted with a child, angry at another driver, put out with a neighbor, and incensed with any number of political figures. We cling tightly to our opinions. We build walls to shield us from those who are different from us; we live by certain rules and expect others to do the same. We grow smug or complacent or just plain weary and fed up. And we fail to measure up to what we claim to be and who God calls us to be. And then grace shows up. Surprisingly. And faithfully. Just when we think we are beyond hope, beyond saving, grace shows up and changes everything.

It did for Paul. While scholars debate whether the first letter to Timothy was actually written by THE Paul, clearly the one writing this letter is intimately familiar with Paul's dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus. Without rehearsing the story of the dramatic flash of light, the blindness, or the dependence on kind and faithful strangers in any great detail, the writer sums it up rather succinctly: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost."¹ So Paul claims for himself the mantle of "Biggest Sinner." It's not really a contest, Paul, but the point is an essential one. Jesus Christ comes to save sinners, which is

¹ 1 Timothy 1:15, Common English Bible

great good news for everyone who falls short of all that God intends, which means everyone, including you and me and Paul and John Newton, the writer of this morning's favorite hymn, "Amazing Grace."

Newton might have argued that he—not Paul—was the foremost among sinners. The child of a ship's captain, John, Sr. and a faithful captain's wife, Elizabeth, Newton's early years were spent learning bible stories and hymns by Isaac Watts under his mother's direction. After her death shortly before he turned 7, his father remarried quickly, to his son's dismay. He had not had a chance to tell his mother goodbye, and now his father showed no interest in grieving her death. The elder Newton soon ushered his son into life on board sailing ships. Before too long, the younger Newton was in charge of ships of his own and eventually found himself swept up in the slave trade after spending time in the British Navy. He was known for his harsh treatment of those below him, his witty but crude songs about those above him, and for his crass behavior and language toward everyone, except for his future wife Mary. He drifted away from the faith his mother instilled in him as a child and later even described himself as hostile and dismissive of Christianity and God himself. After spending time trading slaves on the coast of Africa, Newton was persuaded to return to England aboard the Greyhound. While on board he wound up reading a classic on Christian devotion. Then one night, in the midst of a horrific storm, he recalled his mother's teachings, the familiar bible studies and hymns and concluded that his life thus far had been a disaster. He felt himself condemned. But then, in the midst of this darkest moment, he also felt lifted by God, saved. Once the ship staggered into port, Newton headed straight for a church to pray and vowed to amend his ways. But as several historians note, he had no framework, no one to walk with him in this newly rediscovered faith. As first mate on yet another slave ship, he returned to his old ways. In time, he was befriended by another sailor who encouraged him in faith and convinced Newton of the "security of the covenant of grace."² An increasing discomfort with the chains and shackles of slave

² Much of this historical background is drawn from a documentary on John Newton produced by Gary Wilkinson.

trading along with an illness that disqualified him from serving as captain of a ship led Newton to pursue life in the ministry. After serving faithfully as a pastor in the small town of Olney, he pastored another church, St. Mary Woolnoth in the City of London. He served there from 1779 until his death in 1807.

Nine years into his tenure there:

In 1788, 34 years after he had retired from the slave trade, Newton broke a long silence on the subject with the publication of a forceful pamphlet *Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade*, in which he described the horrific conditions of the slave ships during the Middle Passage. He apologized for ‘a confession, which ... comes too late ... It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.’³

He often preached against the slave trade from the pulpit, to a congregation largely filled with bankers who made their profits from the practice Newton now loudly condemned. The former slave trader became pastor to abolitionists in parliament and parishioners whom he lovingly and firmly challenged to question how their livelihoods lined up with the life given to them in Jesus Christ.

That’s grace at work. Amazing grace. Grace has a way of showing up, not simply as a comforting blanket of peace, but as a nudge, a push or a tug toward a life that not only basks in God’s saving ways, but also serves to bring light and justice—and yes, grace—to others. It was grace that overwhelmed Paul and set him on a new road toward serving the very Christ he once vilified. It was grace that began nudging Newton away from the slave trade long before the public outcry. And it was grace that took Ken Parker down a road he never expected to travel.

Just one year ago, Parker marched with a neo-Nazi group in Charlottesville. He had earned the rank of Grand Dragon in the Ku Klux Klan for his success in recruiting new members in Georgia and then in Florida where he now lives. On that August day, before Heather Heyer was hit and killed by a

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Newton

car, Parker and some others headed to a parking garage to regroup after the rally was declared to be an unlawful gathering. There he met Deeyah Khan, a documentary filmmaker:

He recalls Khan's kindness in a moment of his weakness: 'I pretty much had heat exhaustion after the rally because we like to wear our black uniforms, and I drank a big Red Bull before the event. And I was hurting and she was trying to make sure I was OK,' Parker says.

In [Khan's] film, Parker is still unabashedly racist, vehemently stating his hatred for Jews and gay people. But as he interacted with Khan more, his proclamations became less certain. Then, over the next few months, he started having doubts.

'She was completely respectful to me and my fiancée the whole time,' he says of Khan. 'And so that kind of got me thinking: She's a really nice lady. Just because she's got darker skin and believes in a different god than the god I believe in, why am I hating these people?'⁴

Amazing grace. Parker's doubts lingered and led him to speak to a black man who was having a cookout near his apartment. That man was William McKinnon III, who happens to be a pastor. Parker and his then-girlfriend said they had some questions, so they and McKinnon sat and talked. The conversation continued and McKinnon invited Parker to come to the church's Easter service on April 1:

And on April 17, 2018 — six years after he joined the Klan and just seven months after Charlottesville — Parker decided he'd had enough.

A month after that, he stood before the mostly African-American congregation of his new church and testified.

'I said I was a grand dragon of the KKK, and then the Klan wasn't hateful enough for me, so I decided to become a Nazi — and a lot of them, their jaws about hit the floor and their eyes got real big,' Parker recalls. 'But after the service, not a single one of them had anything negative to

⁴ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/ex-klk-member-denounces-hate-groups-one-year-after-rallying-n899326>

say. They're all coming up and hugging me and shaking my hand, you know, building me up instead of tearing me down.'

From there, the transformation sped up. On July 21, wearing a different kind of robe, Parker waded into the Atlantic [Ocean] surrounded by members of that same church. McKinnon embraced him, and then dipped his head down into the water to baptize him. He rose up, blinking and wiping water from his face, then walked toward a line of fellow congregants waiting for a hug... 'I want to say I'm sorry. I do apologize,' Parker says when asked about all the people he has hurt along the way. 'I know I've spread hate and discontent through this city immensely — probably made little kids scared to sleep in their own beds in their own neighborhoods.' The former neo-Nazi says he's started to get messages from people in the hate movement. But instead of recruiting them, he now tells them to follow the same path he did.⁵

Amazing grace. It is easy to see and point to in the big moments, a baptism, a dramatic storm, but I think perhaps that grace is more amazing in the nudges, the tugs, the words. John Newton's return to faith did not end when he began writing sermons. He had felt a discomfort a nudge that told him slavery was wrong, that men, women, and children do not belong in chains. Even Paul's transformation continued with the encouragement of Ananias and others. Yes, Paul tells us that grace overflowed for him in that encounter with Christ on the Damascus road, but he also celebrates Christ Jesus' "utmost patience." Nudges, tugs, and patient, tenacious words of grace led Paul to keep the faith, to learn from and be welcomed by those he had formerly fought against all those years before. There was no flash of light, no real Damascus road experience for Ken Parker. Instead it was those nudges, tugs, and patient words of grace that began to transform him and the life he now leads.

⁵ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/ex-kuu-member-denounces-hate-groups-one-year-after-rallying-n899326>

In a documentary about Newton's life, one historian mentions that Newton was not alone in his acceptance of slavery as a decent and ethical institution. And almost as an afterthought, that same historian wonders aloud where our blind spots are today. And I felt those pesky nudges, tugs, and persistent words of grace going to work on me. Over the past few years I have begun to see a bit more of the racism that is woven into the fabric of our beloved nation and the privilege I enjoy simply because of the color of my skin and the family into which I was born. But I'm sure I'm still missing something. I know I still fall short. What am I still unable to see? Where am I still unwilling to bend? Where could God be nudging me toward forgiveness, justice, or even an entirely new way of seeing? "I once was blind," the hymn has me sing. In many ways, I'm quite sure I still am. But grace keeps showing up. And I trust that that grace will keep showing up, because God is abundantly gracious and in Jesus Christ, as Paul reminds us, God is also infinitely patient. That's grace. Amazing grace. *Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.