

“Amazing Grace?”

a sermon by

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First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

August 15, 2004

Text: “Soon afterward Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out--the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, ‘Don’t cry.’ Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, ‘Young man, I say to you, get up!’ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. ‘A great prophet has appeared among us,’ they said. ‘God has come to help his people.’ This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country” Luke 7:11-17 (NIV).

We began worship this morning by singing Amazing Grace. Amazing Grace. It is probably the most recognized Christian hymn throughout the world. It has been translated into more than fifty languages; it has been recorded by dozens of artists; and as far as I know, it is the only song in history to be a number one hit on the billboard charts more than two-hundred years after it was written. But why?

After all, “grace” is a simple word. It is five letters. It begins with a simple “g” and ends with a simple “e.” Most of the time we do not even capitalize the “g.” It is a common word.

Here in our church, and in churches throughout the world, we talk about it all the time. So to borrow Philip Yancey's question, "what is it that makes grace so amazing?"

Since I am new among you, it is only fitting that you begin to learn a little about me, because where I have been drives who I am now and it drives who I desire to be. Where I have been is the foundation of my life and how I approach ministry. I grew up in an often traumatic home. There are multiple divorces between my parents and such things as abandonment, abuse, addiction, suicide, and depression have plagued generations of my family. In fact, I lived with a deep sense of inner terror until I finally moved out on my own in high school. And through all of this, God bore the brunt of my complacency, my anger and my rebellion.

In 1994, however, my life changed dramatically when I found myself two years out of high school and on the doorsteps of Whitworth College. Whitworth is a private, Presbyterian, liberal arts college and, in many ways, it was the last place I wanted to be. It was the last place I wanted to be because it was private--which means it was expensive--and it was Christian, which in my mind then translated as hypocritical and judgmental. But I also recognized my need for a college education and Whitworth was one of the only places willing to give an angry, at-risk, kid such as myself a chance.

At Whitworth, I immediately found myself surrounded by people of faith--people who believed in a loving, caring, present, and all-powerful God--but that had not been my experience. And it didn't take long for me to react against what I was being told. After all, how could God be loving in light of the events of my family? And if God was truly present and all-powerful, why did God not intervene? Why did God simply sit back and allow me and my family to suffer? This was the nature of my questioning, and, throughout my freshman year, my questions grew in intensity, until they finally came to a head in my sophomore year.

During my sophomore year I went on a January retreat with a professor and a handful of my closest friends. And one night while on this retreat, I cornered a few of my closest friends and for two hours I poured out my heart before them. I laid out all of my questions and all of my frustrations and I begged them to give me an answer. And for two hours they did their best to give me the best theological answers they could find and with each new answer, I only grew more and more angry.

Finally in disgust, I strapped on my skis and skied to my professor's cabin and in the middle of the night I began to pound upon his door. I pounded upon his door until he answered and then when he did, I let loose. For an hour I poured out the details of my life and then I dared him to respond. "You," I said, "You, tell me--where was God."

For the longest time he simply sat there--silently without speaking a word--and then when he did speak, his words changed my life. Slowly, deliberately, he began to tell me about his life. You see he was a man already too familiar with suffering. He began to tell me of a horrific night just a few years prior to our encounter. He began to tell me of how his family had gone to an Indian pow-wow in rural Idaho. They were on their way home from a fun-filled afternoon when out of the middle of nowhere came another car, driving much too fast, and swerving all over the

road. He told me of how that car careened out of its lane and hit them head-on. He described the horror of the event as he desperately ran from broken family member to broken family member. In a trance he described what it was like to hold each member of his family as they breathed their last--his wife, his mother, and his youngest daughter all died in his arms--three generations of women gone within a heartbeat--suddenly leaving him a single father of three remaining broken children.

It was upon this man's door that I had pounded and I will never forget his words. With tears in his eyes he concluded his story by saying, "Gregg, your life and your family are obviously broken, and since the accident, my life and my family are broken. What I am about to do, I have never done; but I want to invite you to become a part of my family. Come over once a week for dinner, go to my kids soccer matches, come to their music recitals, and maybe-just maybe, in the midst of our brokenness, we can find some wholeness together."

I have to tell you I was floored, because for the first time in my life-I got it. As I sat there, for the first time in my life I felt the presence of God. As I looked into his tear-filled eyes, for the first time in my life I saw the tears of God weeping for me. As I listened to his invitation, for the first time in my life I recognized the supernatural hand of God reaching out through this man to embrace me. I got it and it was life transforming.

In our story today, Jesus is preparing to enter into the town of Nain, when he encounters a funeral. The only son of an already widowed mother has died. And the text tells us that as Jesus looks out He sees this woman, this grieving mother, who is already too familiar with suffering--and his heart is filled with compassion. The Greek word used here for compassion is the strongest word in the Greek language for sympathy. Jesus is heartbroken by what he sees.

I want you to get a picture of this woman. Imagine her walking shoulders slumped with the weight of grief upon her back. Imagine her, this woman who is already too familiar with grief, as she treads along this road that she has already tread upon at least once before. Imagine her alone, despite the fact that she is surrounded by a crowd. Picture the professional wailers--hear their crashing cymbals and whining flutes. Picture her as Jesus sees her, broken, distraught, faith in shambles, with a cloud over her head and chains upon her soul. I can only imagine the questions and the anger that must have been upon her heart when Jesus walks up to her and says, "don't cry."

Now picture the savior of the world standing there, looking at this woman through the tears of his compassion. Imagine him, moved to the depths of his heart, imagine him, saying, "Don't cry." "Don't cry." And then see him, see him, as he reaches out, touches the coffin, making him ceremonially unclean. Imagine him saying, "Young man, I say to you, get up." Those present must have thought him crazy. First off, who tells a mother upon the death of her child not to cry? Secondly, who simply walks up to a stranger's funeral, touches the coffin, and then begins to speak to the dead!

But an amazing thing happens; the young man sits up and begins to talk and Jesus gives him back to his mother. Think a moment about the renewal this woman must have felt. What was taken from her was restored. That which she thought was lost was found. That which was most precious to her was suddenly preserved by the divine hand of God. Her life and livelihood, her hopes and dreams, but most importantly her family and her faith were renewed and restored. Her mourning was turned to dancing.

But it doesn't end there. The text tells us that those present began to praise God, because you see, they got it. Through Jesus' compassion, they saw the tears of God. Through Jesus' touch they recognized the supernatural hand of God reaching down to renew human life. As Jesus gives the young man back to his mother, they recognize the presence of God as life is restored and transformed. Through Jesus' tears, through Jesus' touch, through Jesus' presence, they recognized the life-renewing, life-restoring, and life-transforming power of God. And the text tells us that they were filled with awe and they began to praise God. They got it.

Brothers and sisters, we began by asking the question: What is so amazing about grace? And the answer is: Grace is amazing because it is anything but simple or common. Grace is amazing because it is nothing short of the supernatural hand of God reaching out to touch, to renew, to restore, and to transform human life. Grace is amazing because it tells us that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. Grace is amazing because it cost God the exorbitant price of His Son upon a cross. Grace is amazing because God has chosen to use us, broken people such as you and me, to reach out to other broken people.

All too often we are tempted to reduce grace to an idea, to a concept, or to a line within a song. And brothers and sisters I beg you to not allow that to happen, because when it does, grace ceases to be anything more than a party favor--a cheap magic trick. And when that happens, grace becomes void of all its power.

Brothers and sisters, as the church, you and I are called to be instruments of grace. Not simple, conceptual grace, not grace that can be encapsulated within a word-but amazing grace-life-transforming, life-renewing, life-restoring grace. Grace is our great commodity. It is our greatest gift. It is the one thing, according to C.S. Lewis, that we have to offer that no other religion can. It is what sets us apart.

The question is, are we willing? Are we willing to open our hearts, are we willing to open up our lives, and are we willing to allow God to use us as life-transforming conduits of love? When we go back to our jobs, our neighborhoods, and our dorms, are we willing to be transparent and broken, are we willing to sacrifice our time, our comfort, our likes, our dislikes, our rights, privileges and freedoms so that God's power might be displayed within us? Are we willing?

Somewhere along the line, Americans have started to equate being good Christians with the number of religious programs attended, with the number of hours spent on social service boards, or with the amount of money placed within the offering plate. And please do not get me

wrong-these are important and even vital. But as good as these things are, they are secondary to the gospel. They are secondary to the message that Jesus Christ desires to be a life-renewing, life-restoring, and life-transforming force within our lives. They are secondary to the fact that God desires to use us for such work.

This week I had a dear friend pass away. He was only twenty-seven and his death shook me deeply. Yet in a way, it also served to remind me of what was most important. It gave me perspective. I have to be honest with you brothers and sisters, if all you ever do is show up for programs and services, then the church has failed you and you have failed the church.

I am not interested in how many hours you spend within this building. What I am interested in is if the gospel is real, present, and visible within your life. Can people recognize God's amazing grace within you? I am more interested in how you are living outside this building than I am in the number of hours you spend within it.

How has Jesus shaped your life? How is Jesus visible to your family, your neighbors, and your co-workers? Can people see the life-transforming power of God within you?

God has designed us to be his hands and feet within this world, but do we really believe that and are we willing? The message of the church is Jesus Christ has faced persecution and suffering. God through Jesus Christ has experienced the pain of the world, has defeated death, and consequently has the power and the desire to restore human life. Because of this we as Christians claim that if Jesus Christ is worth anything then Jesus Christ is worth everything! Why? Because Jesus Christ has already done everything on our behalf.

Brothers and sisters, let us not forsake our first love-but instead let us proclaim to the world that God is present, that God cares, and that God desires to redeem human life. Let us embrace the grace we have been given and respond by sharing that life-transforming grace with those who are broken among us.

Grace is amazing because it goes against all human logic and it defies human experience -it demands selflessness. It demands personal sacrifice and yet it is the greatest gift any of us have ever received and it stands as the greatest gift we can ever give. Will we allow the gift of grace we have received to be evident in our lives and will we in turn give it back to those around us so that God's life-transforming power might be displayed? For the sake of a broken world, for the sake of broken families, for the sake of broken people, such as myself, I pray so.

