

Wesley United Methodist Church
Bethlehem, PA
October 26, 1997; Dr. Arthur Freeman
Scripture: Luke 1:39-55; 15:11-32

Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound

This Sunday is celebrated as Access Sunday. It is a time when we remind ourselves of the need of all persons to have access to worship and spiritual resources and to participate in the life and ministry of their religious communities. Wesley United Methodist Church has committed itself to this. This is viewed not only as the right of each person but as contributing to the enrichment and giftedness of each religious community. We cannot afford to be deprived of the gifts which each person brings any more than we can afford to neglect dignifying the personhood of each which has so much to do with one's gifts. To make no place for a person's gifts is to make no place for the person.

Fortunately today we have much national support in dealing with disability and securing the rights of the disabled. In 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed. There is the National Organization on Disability which "promotes the acceptance and full participation, in all aspects of life, of America's forty-nine million Americans with physical, sensory or mental disabilities" and pursues its mission through the Community Partnership Program, a network of more than 4,500 cities in 50 states. The American Association on Retardation also has a Religion Division. The concerns of these national organizations is expressed in our community by the Interfaith Disabilities Coalition of the Lehigh Valley. And we have congregations such as Wesley Methodist Church which has had a long commitment to being a Welcoming Church.

Persons with disability are first of all persons. They are not to be depersonalized and described only as "disabled." They and their families live with great courage, faith, love and hope and have much to teach us not only about the nature of their struggle with life, but also ours. Central to what I wish to say is the affirmation that in hearing and learning about "them" we learn about "us."

All of us know the hymn Amazing Grace:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

I don't much like the phrase "wretch like me." I have my faults, but "wretch"? That's pushing things too far. But then again it may pretty well describe how what counts is not so much what I bring to life but what the grace that God gives me as gift brings to life. We cannot produce what God would give, which ultimately dignifies us. That is where life begins: in God's grace. Do we really believe it? Do we live by it? In our society our value to others is constructed from our successful development, our accomplishment, our appearance, our ability, and what we own. We more or less grant that salvation may depend on grace, though even with this we are somewhat uncomfortable. But does not the rest of life depend upon us? That's what most people have been telling us – all our lives. No employer is going to hire and pay us by grace. No college is going to give us a degree by grace. No bank will forgive a mortgage by grace. And after all, doesn't what we do really ultimately count? How can life, our dignity, our personal value really depend on grace. This runs against all that our society has taught us. Society

values the accomplished, the good-looking, the successful, the educated, the powerful, and the normal (whatever that is). And if we want to make it within our world we must play our world's games.

BUT -- Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

In 1963 Jean Vanier, son of a Canadian Premier, professor of Philosophy in St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, felt a call from God to share his life with people who had a mental handicap. And so in Trosly-Breuil, France, he began a small home in which he would live with Raphael and Philippe. This was the beginning of L'Arche (a French word which means "the Ark"), the beginning of what was to become 70 communities for the care of the mentally handicapped throughout the world. What changed him was becoming aware of the values of the heart, not just the values of the head. He admits,

... in some respects, my heart was still entrenched behind barriers of efficiency, reason, and even my own will. These wounded and thirsty hearts were like a call which echoed in my own heart.

In welcoming and listening to Raphael and Philippe, and so many others who had been put aside, I let myself be carried into an unknown world. I discovered the depths of their sufferings, the cry within them for authentic relationships, as well as the joy of living together.

.... They opened me to the discovery of my own humanity. They drew me, almost in spite of myself, into the heart of community life and into the heart of the Beatitudes and the Gospels. They helped me discover the meaning of a covenant with another and how it is founded on a covenant with God.¹

What Vanier discovered was that the essence of life was not intellect or power or accomplishment, but heart – heart understood as the essence of being human and the place where God dwells, heart understood as the place where humans enter into relationship, touch each other and love each other.

Henri Nouwen, well-known writer of spiritual literature, had been on the faculty of Yale and Harvard Divinity Schools but was struggling over his mission in life when Vanier offered him a home at L'Arche. He too moved from the world of the intellect to the world of the heart. For about seven years, besides his other responsibilities, Nouwen cared for Adam, a young man who could not speak or move without assistance and who suffered from epileptic seizures. Adam died about a year before Henri's unexpected death, and his last book became *Adam, God's Beloved*,² the story of Adam and his ministry cast in the form of the life and ministry of Jesus. Nouwen comments:

And while I, the so-called "normal" person, kept wondering how much Adam was like me, he had no ability or need to make any comparisons. He simply lived and by his life invited me to receive his unique gift, wrapped in weakness but given for my transformation. While I tended to worry about what I did and how much I could produce, Adam was announcing to me that "being is more important than doing." While I was preoccupied with the way I was talked about or written about,

¹ Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them*, NY: Paulist Press, 1989, p. 2.

² Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Adam: God's Beloved*, NY: Orbis, 1997.

Adam was quietly telling me that “God’s love is more important than the praise of people.” While I was concerned about my individual accomplishments, Adam was reminding me that “doing things together is more important than doing things alone.” Adam couldn’t produce anything, had no fame to be proud of, couldn’t brag of any award or trophy. But by his very life, he was the most radical witness to the truth of our lives that I have ever encountered.

It took me a long time to see this complete reversal of values, but once I experienced it, it was as if I was walking into completely new spiritual territory. I now understood more clearly what Jesus meant when he said, “Blessed are your eyes because they see, your ears because they hear! In truth I tell you, many prophets and upright people longed to see what you see, and never saw it; to hear what you hear, and never heard it” (Matt. 13:16,17). The great paradoxes of the Gospel – that the last will be the first, that those who lose their lives will gain them, that the poor are blessed and that the gentle will inherit the Kingdom – all became incarnate for me in Adam.³

What really is the essence of a human being? Our accomplishments and development are so much dependent on the neurological-biological system within which we live. With the right genetics and a bit of biological and developmental luck, and some environmental good fortune, besides the hard work of family to provide advantage; with our engagement in our developmental struggle, with years of education, we become someone. Whew! What a job!

But were we not someone when we lay in our state of greatest disablement, our infancy, unable to speak, having no concepts for this new world we’ve entered, able to little move about, completely dependent? And are we not still someone as we perhaps lose in the aging process some of what we have gained or lie in bed disabled by illness. Is there not something of value about us, something profound living within us, however we are variously enabled? Is there not something essential of which no life circumstances can rob us?

I am continually reminded of “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound!” Does not life start from what God gives, not what we produce? Does not life start from the heart and the human soul? What we must never forget is that our perspective on disability not only affects how we regard persons with disability, but how we regard and value ourselves in our own struggle with life. Mary Jane Owen of the National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities reminds us of how we share the humanity of the disabled and indicates we will be more aware of this if we speak of it as “shared fragility” and think of ourselves as “temporarily able-bodied.”⁴

There are two biblical stories that I would now like to share with you. The first is the story of two children of a prodigal father. We usually know it as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but the star character is really a very unusual father whose love for his children knows no bounds and is not disturbed by their struggle with life and with him.

A father has two sons, neither of whom has done too well developmentally. They have no physical handicaps, but they are handicapped in love, in relationship, and in development to maturity. Each has a long ways to grow. The younger can’t understand the meaning of home and father at all. He only knows his needs. He wants to get away to try out his life, and so asks for his share of the inheritance he would

³ Nouwen, pp. 55-56

⁴ Janet Miller Rife, *Injured Mind: Shattered Dreams*, Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books, 1994, p. 165.

receive at his father's death. The father divides his property between his two sons, not just giving to the one but to both, and so has nothing left. Foolish father to risk himself for his children and place himself at their mercy! Fortunately the older son is more responsible, does what his society expected, stays home and cares for what is left of the property while the younger son is off for a good time. With all his money spent and starvation staring him in the face, the younger son comes home and is embraced by his father who runs to meet him -- even before he gets a chance to blurt out his rehearsed repentance: "Father, I have sinned." The father orders a feast to welcome him home, but the older brother will have none of this and angrily criticizes his father for what he thinks the father never gave him. Suddenly we are aware that there is also something wrong with the elder brother. He also has no awareness that his father loves him. All of his resentment of his responsibilities over the years pours out.

Note that the father has given up everything so that the children cannot confuse him with things. He is the home for the children. It is not the house or the property that matters. His heart is open to his children and the question is whether they will come home, not to his home, which now he does not even own, but to his heart. But never, never, never is his love for his children dependent on their accomplishments, their development, or even their understanding of the father. Can't you hear someone singing "Amazing grace" at the party for the returned son. How much is this like God who sees us as his children, just as we are, whatever our accomplishments or failures, whatever our abilities, the God who resides in our hearts, whose heart is our home, and who welcomes us home to his heart.

The other story is about Jesus and John the Baptist, but neither is born yet. They are both in their mothers' wombs. Mary, with Jesus in her womb, visits Elizabeth, with John the Baptist in her womb. And when Mary greeted Elizabeth, the child in her womb leapt for joy. Amazing Grace. Even before birth. Even before development. Even before any ability to form concepts and understand, John leapt for joy. Is that possible? In some ways this sounds strangely modern, this recognition of prenatal awareness. There are many reasons for Luke putting this story there, but one of the reasons is to remind us, as Mary indicates in her song, that God has scattered the proud, put down the mighty, and exalted those of low degree. And who was this that met John the Baptist in this interuterine communication? It was God who was becoming flesh and would be born into a world where he would be as weak as an infant, struggle with life as we, and would suffer a painful death completely disabled on a cross. God chose disablement that he might be the Amazing Grace on which we build life. Wouldn't it be interesting to ask God about this experience:

*What did you think
when you opened your eyes
and looked
upon this strange world
you'd brought to be
and loved,
sometimes from far?*

*What did you think
when you felt life
moving in arms and legs,
when you lay
upon the softness of
your mother's breast?*

*What did you think
when you knew
how long it'd be
before you walked
and only sounds, strange,
came from your lips?*

*What did you think
when you knew
upon the cross you'd die
and struggle, infant-like,
to grasp your destiny
without power?*

*What did you think
of that vast world
beyond the crib
to which you came,
for which you'd give
your life?*

*And did you wonder why
and did you wonder how
it would all come out
and did you wonder
what they'd think
of you, when they did know?*

I hope that it is clear that the issues with which we have grappled are not just the issues of the apparently disabled, but belong to us all. We are taught not just about others, but about us, about the possibilities, needs and fragility of our shared humanity. And we who may seem most abled are taught that we will have value even in those times when we are least abled, when we cannot live out what others expect, when we struggle with life, when we sink into depression and ponder our worth. It is Amazing Grace which is the essence and starting point of all life, which gift we bear in our hearts to share with others. If we value accomplishment we must value it as the gift we give back to God and life, not the effort which produces our value.

Not only do we learn something about us and life, but we also learn something profound about God. God suffers the same limits to life to which we are subject. God does this because God loves us. But also God does this because it is the only way that grace can be provided in the midst of the life we must live. God is where we are to provide us with the support we need. And in the midst of whatever aloneness life inflicts, we are never alone.

And we hear the call to assist those for whom existence is difficult. We choose to surround them with “circles of support”⁵ that they fully share the community of graced human existence which is the church and that they be supported toward some measure of personal fulfillment. No life should be deprived of its meaning.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

A Credo

*Each person is a being unique.
No one is exactly the same as another.
Some of our differences are by nature.
Some are by accident.
We experience anxiety in the presence of those too different
and in the presence of our differences.
We wonder how to relate and how to be related to.*

⁵ Rife, p. 166.

*And yet spirit speaks to spirit,
and we find in the heart, soul, and embodiment of each
that which makes us distinctively human.*

*How strange and wonderful our differences,
and sometimes, how painful.
But is there really any normative way to be,
and in our being,
is there any way without pain -- and joy?*

*Whatever we can become,
we must with all our soul and courage affirm who we are.
Sometimes we have no others who can do this for us.
Whatever our limits, we must affirm
who we are and our transcendence.
We live within this world and within the body.
But also we transcend it.
Like soaring eagles we engage in flights
through our inner and spiritual reality
and for moments soar free,
to return again to live with new strength and vitality
within our limits and possibilities..*

*We deeply rejoice
when we discover those who will affirm us as we are,
who will uphold us when we cannot uphold ourselves,
who will receive the gifts we may struggle to offer,
who will share our joy at being alive
and live with us our anger and tears.*

*We are!
We are children of God and God's world
and children of this earth!
We have bodies,
but also souls!
Woe if we forget either,
for we diminish our possibilities
and misunderstand our existence.*

*With all my courage
and God's blessing
I will be, and I will to be.*