

Epistle Lesson**Romans 6:1-11****Sermon****United in Life to God****Rev. Joel L. Tolbert**

The song, "Amazing Grace," may be one of the most recognizable Christian tunes in all the world. Jill one day sat down at the computer and downloaded 10 or so versions of it from various artists, everything from bagpipes to Willie Nelson, from electric guitar rock to orchestra strings and brass. We'll get to hear the Nitty Gritty Dirt band version a little bit later in today's service. Same tune... permeating all these different genres and cultures. There must be something about it that transcends all our differences and speaks to us all, regardless of age, background, citizenship, or life experience.

If I stop to wonder what that might be, I suppose it is the great message in the tune. God's grace. God's grace saved me. I was lost, but God's grace found me. And one day, God's grace will bring me home. We all know trouble. And people who are in trouble want to be saved. We've all had that feeling of being lost. And people who are lost want and appreciate being found. And we've all found ourselves quite some distance from home before. And people who are traveling for a long time look forward to getting home. If God's grace really is, as the song suggests, capable of all three of those things, saving, finding, bringing home, then grace is truly wonderful, more than wonderful, amazing.

So what is it that blind us from seeing the amazing grace all around us, and trusting the life grace has in store ahead of us? It may be the other stuff, the non-grace of this life and this world, which tries to cast long, dark shadows toward the grace, shadows like hunger, pain, sickness, sorrow... war, hatred, prejudice, bigotry... fear... and even death.

And thus, the ancient tension mounts. Our tradition and scriptures describe a world, a people, graced into existence by a God who loves, and makes all that is good, and even made all of the peoples of this world in the image of God's own self. Our faith, and our belief certifies this as true, and gives thanks to God for God's amazing grace all through eternity and even to the close of the age. From our book of Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism says in Question 6, "God created (humankind) good and in (God's) image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that (we) might rightly know (our) creator, love (God) with (our) whole heart, and live with (God) in eternal blessedness, praising and glorifying (God)." Those truths of God's grace are what we confess, and believe, and preach, and affirm every Sunday, and hopefully all those days in between Sundays, as well. God did make, and God does love. And we believe it. Yet, somehow we overlook the grace, and let the non-grace drive our decisions and actions far too often.

Paul, in this morning's letter, for the non-grace in the world, uses the word sin. How do you think of sin? I suppose some might be tempted here to think of sin as actions, decisions, words... things we do, or say, that are clearly not right before God. And yes, those actions of yours and mine and this church and this nation that are not in line with God's will or God's mission would be included in Paul's huge concept called sin. And we, as individuals, as a church, as citizens, would be held accountable to God for any way we commit sins ourselves, or contribute to sins being committed on our behalf or in our presence or in our name.

But in our Reformed tradition, sin is not just those things we do that we shouldn't have, or those things we didn't do that we should have. Sin is also a condition into which we were born. In that same Heidelberg Catechism, the very next questions, numbers 7 and 8, it describes how the corruption of all human nature comes to us before we are conceived, before we are born, through the sin and the sins of our ancestors, and that we are altogether, everyone of us that have ever lived, unable to choose good, unable to choose not to sin, unable to do any good ourselves, and are all prone to evil in everything we do. Without God's intervention, we cannot choose good, and where we do seem to choose good, we must realize that the choice was not ours, but God's amazing grace, through us, on our behalf.

Paul is going through all of this to theologially remind the Roman church of the difference between whose they were, and whose they are now, the difference between where they were, and where they are going now. You see, the Roman church, and we, know Jesus Christ. Despite the fact that the Roman Christians, and we, were born in sin, and despite that fact that the Roman Christians, and we, were and are totally incapable of fulfilling the requirements of the Law, the Torah, the commandments, Christ came. We were slaves to sin. But Christ took upon himself the wages of sin for all, both the actions sins, and the condition sin, and suffered on the cross, even unto death. We were headed for that death. But God loved us so much, that's God's own son, God's very self died under sin that was not his own, died our death for us, and in so doing paid the ransom price for all sinners.

That's what we mean when we sing God's amazing grace. We were trapped, enslaved to sin. We were born into it, lost in it, unable to not sin, unable to save ourselves from it. But by God's free and amazing grace, Jesus the Christ took the wages of sin upon himself, and died to pay the ultimate price for the sins of the whole world, including our sinfulness. Christ descended into the deepest depths of human pain and death. Christ descended into hell. And then, by God's amazing grace, he rose again. He rose from the dead, and walked and talked and ate and preached and sent. And in his rising, he freed all those who die to sin through Him to also find freedom and walk again in the newness of life. He faced death, the scariest, most hollow threat of sin, and conquered it once, for all.

Do you hear what Paul is telling us about the supposed tension we sometimes feel between God's Grace and Sin, our sin, the sin of the world? I might be crazy here, but I think I hear Paul telling us there is no tension. We'd like to insist there is, because the feelings are so real, so big. They flood us. The fear. The grief. They overwhelm us, and they sometimes feel more real to us than God does. And we'd like to throw these things back in God's face and demand an explanation as to why God's grace didn't come faster, sooner, or the way we wanted! But the tension we feel between God's amazing grace and the wages of sin in this world is because we are afraid, because we still fear sin might win. And what are the wages of sin? What is the worse thing that could possibly happen to us, as a result of sin? Death. Death is the scariest threat of sin.

That's why Paul reminds the believers in Rome, and those gathered here today that the tension, the fear of death, is released, because we are already dead. Death is no longer scary to those who have already died. We've already been through it, in baptism. In baptism, the

life we used to live, for ourselves, was drowned. That former life died into Christ. The life we have now, is not ours but Gods. Baptism is the sign and seal of God on a believer, on a church, that it's okay to let the life that was, die, so that the life that will be, may live. Our old self is crucified with him. We are no longer slaves to sin, and we can no longer fear dying. We've already died once, and that frees us from sin's threat of death. Fear of dying can no longer be our main reason for deciding or doing anything. Any decision we might make in this new life, in our individual lives, in the life of this church, out of fear of dying is a decision of the former life that is already dead. That's what Paul means when he sarcastically asks "Should we continue in sin so that God's grace may abound? Certainly not! How can we, who already died to sin, go on living as if it still holds us or scares us." You see, that former life that would have decided things in ways to prevent or avoid death, that life is already dead. The new life is life not AGAINST death, but FOR God. The new life of all God's children, and all God's churches, is not a life steered by fear walking away from death, but a walking toward God's mission and God's calling.

In baptism, we died a death like his. And just as Christ was raised from his death, so too baptism signifies God's promise that on the other side of dying in baptism, we too already walk in the newness of life. Christ died, but was raised, and will never die again. And the life Christ lives, he lives to God. So we too have already died in the life we once lived to ourselves, and to sin, and we too have already risen, and we too continue to rise into this new life we now live to God.

In the song Amazing Grace, it says grace taught me what to fear. Thanks to God's gift of the Law, we see our own sin and we were right to be afraid, because God expects us to love God and to love our neighbor, and we know we cannot fully fulfill it, and we know the price, death. But grace does not leave us there, to fear. The song then sings, Grace my fears relieved. In God's grace, Jesus Christ died for the sin that was not his own, for the sin of the world. Grace opened the path from death to new life once, for all. The new life of seeing grace, not fear, the new life lived toward God, not away from death, is already started for us. And it is our calling, and our privilege to continue "loving (God) with (our) whole heart, and living with (God) in eternal blessedness, praising and glorifying (God)" forever.

Good friends, let the baptism in our past be the end of our fear of death, the end of our life for ourselves, and let today be another beginning in walking this new life to God. And if you find yourself also believing in the amazing power of God's grace, but have yet to be baptized, I invite you to come and speak to me following today's service. We, as your fellow travelers, would love to celebrate the faith that God's grace has already given you, and to be united with you in life unto Christ.