

Coram Deo
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi
Deo Volente
Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church
by the Rev. Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

“The Awful Grace of God”

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10

April 23, 2023

It was 55 years ago this past Easter/Holy Week that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and the world came again to hear the words by Aeschylus and begin to understand them, in the light of it when Robert Kennedy, April 4, 1968 who himself was grieving the loss of his brother John, who too, was assassinated five years earlier on November 22, 1963.

He said that night, "Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort. In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in...But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to get beyond these rather difficult times...it is in difficult times that I have come to read my favorite poet was Aeschylus, who once wrote:

“He who learns must suffer.
And even in our sleep,
 pain
 which cannot forget
 falls
drop by drop upon the heart,
 until,
in our own despair,
 against our will,
 comes wisdom
through the awful grace of God.”

AESCHYLUS (*Agamemnon* 179-183)

The awful grace of God comes in advance of the amazing grace of God. The awful grace of God is the experience of wisdom that is born out of painful encounters and occurrence. It is learning through the school of hard knocks. It is a grace that never gives up until its purpose of change and redemption is complete and the person can then experience the amazing grace of God. It is a grace that Aeschylus describes when he says, it falls drop by drop upon the heart until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”

When Aeschylus wrote these words some 525 years before the birth of Jesus. He was the father of Greek tragedy and, in play, "*Seven Against Thebes*," laid the burden of human evil at the feet of human beings. Acts of wickedness, he suggested, arise from ambition, greed, and human frailty.

We have all heard and sung that hymn Amazing Grace written by John Newton. But you may not have known that it was the awful grace of God that continued its work in him for years before he was able to write the hymn Amazing Grace.

Often people miss that Newton was converted in March of 1748 – which would have made him 23 years of age – he was faced with a turning point in his life. It was during a storm aboard a slave ship that he was working on that all thought that this was it and that they were all going to die. It caused Newton to call out to God asking for God’s mercy. When God answered his prayer and spared his life; he knew that things would have to change. He wanted to make a new start of things and get rid of his debt so that he could marry his sweet heart Polly and become a minister and the quickest way to make money was to continue his work on the slave ships and later even captain a slave ship...”

So even after his conversion he continued in this wretched and despicable life. This meant that from 1748 to 1750 he traded in slaves even as a Christian. And it was not until many years later that Newton was finally moved by the wretchedness of his actions that he wrote the hymn Amazing grace in 1779 – which was a full 29 years later.

The awful grace of God continued to work out its will in Newton for the next 29 years until finally, over 30 thirty years after his conversion he finally declared:

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.

Why is this so important? It is important because it means that God will never ever give up on you. Let me say that again. God will never ever give up on you.

It means that “He who began a good work in you will continue it until the day of Jesus Christ.” It means that no matter what you have done, or haven’t done, God desires the best for you. God desires you to experience that amazing grace and favor of God; even if that means to get there you might first have to benefit the awful grace of God.

I

Embrace your weakness; don’t be embarrassed of it. “*7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*” (2 Cor 12:7)

I read about a woman who telephoned a friend and asked how she was feeling, "Terrible," came the reply over the wire, "my head's splitting and my back and legs are killing me. The house is a mess, and the kids are simply driving me crazy." Very sympathetically the caller said, "Listen, go and lie down, I'll come over right away and cook lunch for you, clean up the house, and take care of the children while you get some rest. By the way, how is Sam?"

"Sam?" the complaining housewife gasped. "I have no husband named Sam."

"My heavens," exclaimed the first woman, "I must have dialed the wrong number."

There was a long pause. "Are you still coming over?" the harried mother asked hopefully. She wasn't embarrassed by her need, she embraced it and was looking for help.

Paul struggle to accept his physical condition that was bothering him and giving him great distress, but he eventually embraced it in spite of the fact that others judged him because of it. Paul had a thorn in the flesh. No one is sure what Paul suffered from but suggestions offered include temptation, opposition, disability and ailments such as malaria, migraine headaches, and epilepsy. A thorn (skolops) is a Greek slang for a disability. Whatever it was it gave him no peace.

Unm Mnumo once said, "May God denies you peace that He might grant you glory." I love this statement. I've always known the truth of this statement because of children. You see, with 6 children, and three grandchildren and another on the way, and having cared for over 1200 more children in our home during the last 38 years, there is no place that I can find any peace without it being shattered by, screaming, shouting, dancing, laughing, crying, giggling or pooping. It really is enough to make you crazy. Then there are the endless trips to the library for projects, dentists, and doctors. "A little girl was brought to the doctor for an ear infection. The doctor was trying to keep her at ease. So while checking out her ear he said, "Is Big Bird in there?" The girl said nothing. He looked in her mouth and said, "Is Oscar the Grouch in there". She said nothing. He then checks her heart. "Is Barney in there?" With that the girl turned to him with a look of disgust and said, "Jesus is in my heart, Barney's on my underwear?"

It really is enough make you crazy--the complaining, and crying, and laughing and dancing. Then at night when all is quiet and the children finally are in bed asleep. I've found myself staring at the five of them and finding myself moved to tears by the glory of God I see in them.

Did you know that God had to create the whole universe just so He could hear the laughter of children? Think of it. He had to create a universe to create you. That is how important you are to Him. If you don't believe me, think about whether or not you would be here if the Universe was not! You see! He had to create a Universe just to create you.

Nietzsche said "One must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star."

Now that was what Paul was getting at. "For I consider that the suffering of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in you. For the groaning of creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God..."

He is saying that "one must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star."

II

Embrace your weakness; don't be embarrassed by it. And secondly, **exchange your weakness; don't be embittered with It.** *"8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." (2 Cor 12:8-9)*

It is not always easy to do the work of love. It means seeing things we would rather not see, facing things we'd rather not face and doing things we would rather not do.

We all know that one of the main problems about traveling by car is that no matter what, you always get into construction. I noticed a sign a while back that a rather wise construction

worker placed on the grader he was driving. It read, "the road to happiness is almost always under construction." "The road to happiness is almost always under construction."

The same applies not only to the roads themselves but to our lives and the lives that we lead. It is one that had detours and difficulties, pot holes and problems and it is not always smooth.

We have all heard it said, "no pain, no gain". And it is true. Each week I go and try to work out in a gym after my physio therapy that I have due to an injury to my leg muscle just before Covid that healed badly because I couldn't get an Xray of it. And every time I go there, I see people in pain. And I'm one of them. And every day, I try to convince myself that this is good pain. Someone said that to me. They said, But John there are different times of pain, and this is good pain." I looked at him. and said, "What Psych ward were you just let out of. "Good pain!?" He was right. Bad pain can push us towards getting help, and good pain produces growth.

We all know a physical workout produces pain because the muscles are being stretched to their limit. This is a gift to the body, for it produces greater strength and health. It is the same for the spiritual as the physical. God allows the pain to come into our life, to produce a greater spiritual gain for our life.

C.S. Lewis once said, "God whispers to us in our pleasure and shouts at us in our pain. Pain is the megaphone to rouse a dulled world." Often we notice God, only after something difficult happens. When the pain comes, it is often only then that we pursue God

St. Teresa of Avila said it simply, "everything is grace." If this is true; then the good gifts are grace, because they are a part of everything-- but then suffering is grace, because it is something. This very hard to accept. For most of us everything in us wants to refuse this fact. We don't want to accept that God could be allowing some suffering in our lives--not that suffering comes from God, but He allows it--to occur so to work out His purpose-- His will in us. So everything remains grace only in the hands of God. It is grace only as it calls us to God.

Paul said, "All things work together for good." Notice that Paul didn't say, that all things are good. Far from it. There are many things that are not good. But if we allow God into them, He will work out some good from what is bad.

Look again a Paul. There he was in prison, having been chained, and beaten. Then he says, "I want you to know brethren, that what has happened to me, has really actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel." He is saying, even this is grace. Not only for him, but for others.

Henri Matisse was nearly 28 years younger than Auguste Renoir, yet the two great artists were dear friends and frequent companions. When Renoir was confined to his home during the last decade of his life, Matisse visited him daily. Renoir, almost paralyzed by arthritis, continued to paint in spite of his infirmities. One day as Matisse watched the elder painter working in his studio, fighting tortuous pain with each brush stroke, he blurted out: "Auguste, why do you continue to paint when you are in such agony?"

Renoir answered simply: "The pain passes, but the beauty remains." And so, almost to his dying day, Renoir put paint to canvas. One of his most famous paintings, *The Bathers*, was completed just two years before his passing, 14 years after he was stricken by this disease.

In life, as with art, the pain passes, but the beauty remains.

III

Embrace your weakness; don't be embarrassed by it. And secondly, exchange your weakness; don't be embittered with it. **And finally, empower your weakness; don't be ensnared by it.**

“That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor 12:11-13)

Problems are a part of life. No one can possibly get away from them. This means that we have only a few options. We can rage against the problem; which often results, in our simply becoming exhausted; expending energy we don't have. We can refuse to face the problem; while running away into denial, or a slow self-destruction through alcohol and drugs. We can choose to become resentful and embittered. The result of which would be that we could simply stoically endure the pain; resigning ourselves to refusing to live life. Or we can release it to God, allowing him to make the most of it by melting away the unimportant so we can make the most of every moment. We can choose to rage against the problem, refuse to face the problem, become resentful because of the problem; all of which result in a waste of life, and a refusal and resistance to life itself. Whoever said life was fair? Life's not fair, but the Lord is faithful.

Because, God will, if we allow Him, take advantage of disadvantage.

As of the first Sunday in June next year, I will be celebrating 35 years of being ordained to the ministry. I remember arriving in my first parish and meeting one of the farmers in his apple orchard. While walking the land with him I noticed a tree that was so filled with apples, that the branches were practically bent to the ground, and had to be held up so they wouldn't break. It was a huge gnarled old tree. When I asked why it was producing so much fruit while the others were not, the orchard owner told me that the year before that tree had produced almost nothing. Instead, it simply produced more bark. As we walked around the old tree, I notice a large gash at the base of the tree, as if an axe had hit it a number of time. The owner of the tree pointed to this point in the tree and said, "Because the tree was spending its energy producing the wrong thing, I made a large gash in the base. The natural result of which, is that the tree stopped producing bark, which was no longer important; and so to preserve itself, produced what was important. This meant more seeds, which means more fruit."

All of us, at various times in our lives expend a great deal of energy on what could be considered the bark of life – those things that may be important, but certainly are not the most important. Some of us spend so much time doing so, that we lose sight of what is truly important. Then the problem come, but still rather than realizing that it is a time to refocus some, become resentful, or rage against life, or refuse to face until we can't do that any longer and we are forced to refocus.

Paul said elsewhere, "I rejoice in my suffering for suffering produces patience, and patience produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint, for God's love is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is with us."

So life is too short to
Wake up with regret
So love those who love you
Forgive those that don't
Believe that everything happens for a reason
And if you get a chance- take it
And if it changes your life – let it
For no one ever said it was going to be easy
Just that it would be worth it.

You think about that. Amen