

Amazing Grace

Rev. John Allen

It is important to have a little back story. And I am going to have to go quick, because the story of Joseph is the longest story about any character in the Bible.

When Joseph was young his brothers were envious of him. They resented that he seemed to be the favorite of the family, that he was the apple of his father's eye, classic older sibling stuff.

But they took their anger to a dramatic extreme, one day out in the fields they stripped their brother, threw him into a pit in the ground and left him for dead. It was only a tinge of mercy that spared his life. With their consciences tugging at them, and a little afraid that someone would find his body and come looking for them, they pulled him up and sold him as a slave to a passing caravan on its way to Egypt.

In Egypt, Joseph served as a slave in the house of the ruler, Pharaoh. He became highly regarded for his ability to predict the future through interpreting dreams.

Joseph predicted that a famine was coming, and told the king, who prudently stored grain so that his people would have food. When the famine came, word got around that the Egyptians had food and so desperate people from all over came down to Egypt for something to eat.

Among that crowd of refugees were Joseph's brothers who, having long ago assumed that they would never see their brother again, ended up at his doorstep needing his help to survive.

They do not recognize him, but he recognizes them.

That is a very fast and simplified story, but you get the idea.

His brother's deserved nothing but his anger and hatred for what they had done to him, and now he has them right where he wants them. What could be better. Their survival depends on him, their little brother, and they don't yet even realized who they are dealing with.

And when his brother's mention their father, Jospheh cannot contain his emotions. It's me he says, through tears. Your brother.

And with his next words, he forgives them. Do not be angry with yourselves. Do not be distressed. We are family. I am yours and you are mine. It's ok.

I don't know about you, but I am not sure I could do that.

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I spent the past two days at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where I trained as a pastor. I was there for some meetings, but on

Friday evening I had a chance to attend a panel discussion about a newly released book.

It is the memoirs of my favorite professor, the distinguished Dr. James Cone, who died this past year the same day my daughter was born.

His memoirs are named after a gospel tune, "Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody."

In the book he recalls his parents, devoted members of the Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal in Bearden, Arkansas where he was born in 1936, during the height of segregation.

He remembers his mother teaching him early about the insults and epithets hurled at him and his family, and the everyday aggressions and indignities of life in a racially segregated and white-supremacist world.

He recalls her words, offered again and again, “Don’t hate like they hate. It’s too heavy a sack to carry.”

He remembers also in his memoir the families of the nine black Christians of Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, SC who were murdered by a young white man who had just sat with them in their Bible study. He recalls how they stood up one after another in court to give statements and one after another offered words of forgiveness to the young white man who had murdered their loved ones.

I don’t know about you, but I am not sure I could do that.

Cone calls it “a profound religious achievement.” He goes on to write that this achievement of forgiveness is not about weakness, not about passivity, but it is about a refusal to let the hater make you hate they way they do.

Forgiveness is a revolt against hatred. Cone says.

It is not for us to tell people who have been wronged that they must forgive. And I am not for one moment condemning those who respond to injustice with anger.

It is not for me to tell people how they should feel or respond.

I am just here to hold up these stories of forgiveness, and invite you to join me in standing in awe of them.

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And I want to join me too in imagining what it would be like to be on the receiving end of grace like that. Because truthfully, each of us is.

The reason that Joseph's embrace of his brothers, and the families of Macedonia's words of forgiveness can be counted as such a profound religious achievement, is because they walk very close to imitating the God we follow in Christ.

Jesus, who with his last breath forgave those who hung him up to die.

This is what God does for you, and for me.

God forgives us, both the banal transgressions and greatest sins of our hands and our hearts. God's heart has a home for us again and again, no matter what we have done, and no matter how many times we do it over again.

This is the greatest news our tradition has to offer is that we do not have to spend our life looking over our shoulder or fearing lightning bolts from the heavens.

God forgives us. Over and over again.

Is it because God is pushover? Because God is timid and weak?

Surely not. It is because God is not about to let us change who God

is. Because God is steadfast in God's love and will not let it sour into hate.

God has determined to stay God. To keep on loving. To leave the heavy sack of hate on the ground, and persist in hopeful love.

God has decided not to form God's heart in the image of humanity, but God steadfastly strives to mold human hearts into a holy shape.

I think about that young man who murdered nine people in their church, sitting in a room where everyone knows every detail of the worst thing he ever did, and what it would be like to hear words of forgiveness over and over again.

I think about Joseph's brothers, confronted with the sibling they left for dead, holding their lives in his hands and choosing generosity and love.

I think about that because I know that God knows each of our whole hearts, and each of our whole lives, and I know that God loves each one of us just as fiercely as ever before.

A love we cannot earn. And a love we cannot lose.

And in all of Christian history, I do not believe that this overwhelming truth has ever been so beautifully expressed as it was in 1779 by John Newton, who called it Amazing Grace.

He knew what he was talking about.

John Newton was the captain of slave ships for a long career. When his health no longer permitted him to sail, he invested in slaving operations as a private financier.

And when his conscience no longer allowed him to do that, he confessed in a published tract the worst of what he had done, the horrors of those ships, the lives he had taken, the pain he had

wrought and he devoted his remaining years working tirelessly toward the abolition of slavery.

And the day that he discovered that God's love for him had not been broken by the worst he had done. The day he, deep in his heart, realized what God's forgiveness really meant.

A love we cannot earn. And a love we cannot lose.

He felt that love fill his heart, and it overflowed into song.

