

*Amazing Grace, Part III: Sanctifying Grace*

*I Corinthians 15:1-11; Ephesians 3:2-10; Romans 12:1-2, 6-8*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*July 22, 2012*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

“I’m not a hero. A ‘hero’s’ a sandwich,” said Steven St. Bernard, whose prompt action this past Tuesday saved the life of a seven year old girl in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn. His quick thinking broke her fall from dancing on a third floor outside air-conditioner. The girl, later reported as autistic, “hit the bushes and the ground a little, but not straight on because of his arms” said eyewitness Latasha Marcus according to ABC News.

St. Bernard, the 52 year old MTA bus driver and father of four has a seven year old daughter, too. He says he was just in the right place at the right time, tearing a tendon in his left arm but saving the young girl from more serious injuries, or even death.

This is “sanctifying grace” in action, “*God’s love freely given,*” that moves us to individual and social holiness and to the final installment of this trilogy on “amazing grace.” One thing is for sure: it’s hard to argue with grace when a life is saved and the rescuer is a “St. Bernard!”

The good news today is that God continues to form and shape us. We are a work in progress toward becoming “complete,” “whole,” “holy” and perfected in the love of God and neighbor.

A quick review: two weeks ago I spoke of “prevenient grace,” the love of God that is extended to us before anything we say or do. Last week we examined “justifying grace,” the love that pardons our sin and puts us—as unholy people—in right relationship with a holy God. Those sermons are available in the back of the church and on our website.

Now the culmination of the yearning God has for us is found in “sanctifying and perfecting grace,” God’s love that shapes us in God’s image. When the Rev. John Wesley, the Anglican cleric

whose Methodist societies became a movement, first sent preachers to America in the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he did so with this admonition: “*to reform the continent and spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.*” God knows, in the wake of the shooting this week in Aurora, Colorado, we still need that mission for this nation. Mr. Wesley used “*scriptural holiness*” and “*Christian perfection*” interchangeable. Both reflect the on-going *process* of sanctification, being conformed to God’s image.

Please turn to the Hymnal, beginning with Hymn #382 and continuing until Hymn #536. This lengthy section reflects the lengthy process of holiness: it is a life-long journey. When Methodist clergy are ordained we must answer many questions, two of which are “*Are you going on to perfection?*” and “*Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?*” The correct answers to both are “*Yes, by the grace of God.*” Note that this does not mean being perfect, doing everything right. In that we shall surely fail. I told the Staff-Parish Committee when I interviewed last April that if I was to be pastor, I guaranteed they would not get a perfect pastor, a guarantee I repeat to you. But I am seeking Christian perfection, doing every right thing, and pray you are, too.

The early Methodists took this seriously. They met weekly and the class, a small group of 10-12 adherents, would ask of each other, “*How goes it with your soul?*” and “*What works of charity have you done?*” In America, to get into those meetings, you had to have a ticket. That’s right: a ticket to get into church! It showed you were a member in good standing in the Methodist society, that you attended the last Quarterly Conference and conformed to Christian example in heart and life. Now today we don’t need tickets to keep anybody out or bring anybody in. But we do need what they stand for, an on-going growth in faith and service.

Sound like work? You bet! If it was easy, everyone would do it. So what kind of work is it? It is personal and social. The

personal is comprised of the very things you might think: prayer, Bible reading and study, public and private worship among them.

Social holiness is expressed by addressing societal ills. Methodists have done this from the very beginning, when they visited in the hospitals and prisons and progressed to addressing, in this country, the social ills of gambling and beverage alcohol addiction, slavery, child labor, world peace, civil rights, AIDS, addictive drugs, human sexuality, reproductive rights and nuclear proliferation, among many, many others. Sometimes people are uncomfortable with this social dimension to our holiness, avoided under the guise of not desiring to mix religion with politics. Such avoidance is not grounded in any Wesleyan notion of Christianity, which this church clearly understands with its commitments to UM ARMY, being a Reconciling Congregation, service at Beth-El Center, among many other commitments

Fine, but where does this come from Biblically? Please look with me at I Corinthians 15, pg. 1048 in your pew Bible. Paul spends the entire chapter talking about the resurrection. He spends verses 1-11—today's text—explaining how the Resurrected Christ appeared to the earliest Christians. Those named are a "Who's Who" of early Christianity, ending with verses 8 -10:

*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he [the resurrected Christ] appeared to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.*

Paul's journey in sanctification began by being accepted. Because of that acceptance he worked to share the Gospel.

A second Biblical source for sanctification is found in a scandal. Yes, a scandal! And it is a scandal that Mary Taylor Memorial Church perpetuates every single Sunday! Please look with me at Ephesians 3:2-10, which is found on Bible p. 1065.

The dual challenges to the community of the writer of Ephesians—either Paul or his protégé—were syncretism and assimilation. What do I mean? Early Christians were Jews. The concern of the Jewish community in a hostile world was the “watering down” of its faith by combining other religious motifs (syncretism) while being absorbed into the majority culture (assimilation); in other words, not being religiously or ethnically pure. So the scandal is that, inspired by the Gospel of Christ’s sacrificial love, the writer expands those who receive God’s welcome to include non-Jews (Gentiles). Look at verse 6:

*...that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.*

Gentiles as well as Jews are welcome! The shock value of that scandal may be lost on modern ears. What if I were to say:

*Whoever you are, wherever you are,  
on your spiritual journey you are welcome here.*

What kind of thing is that to say? Oh, wait: it is what we say about ourselves at Mary Taylor Memorial Church, every Sunday in our bulletin and on our website and in our “Beacon” and other places I have yet to learn. We may be excited to see it or we may wonder why it is there or we may not even notice it because we have seen it so often but, my friends, it is a scandal! For what are we saying when we say everyone is welcome?

Jew and Gentile are welcome.

Protestant and Catholic and Orthodox are welcome.

Liberal and conservative are welcome.

Democrat, Republican and unaffiliated are welcome.

People who grew up on the wrong side of the tracks and people who grew up with every advantage are welcome. White and black and brown and people of every rainbow color...gay and straight and lesbian and bisexual and transgender...people who sing the classics and people who can’t carry a tune in a bucket...people who can run a 7 minute mile and people whose

mobility is by cane, walker and wheelchair... people born and raised in Milford and people “from away” who love this community, too... people whose faith is rock solid and people whose prayer is “*Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.*” All are welcome for God loves everyone: no exceptions!

My friends, this is a scandal! But, thanks be to God, it is the scandal of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

That scandal is why we are here, because everyone is indeed welcome and we know—we KNOW—when we are at our best that this is surely what God intends. And because it is, it motivates us to act, action grounded in the last of this morning’s readings, Romans 12, found on pages 1033 and 1034 in your pew Bible.

Because we are forgiven, and because we are welcomed, we are to “*present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*” Paul uses that image of giving our very bodies to the work of God as a reminder that we all have different gifts and all are to be offered. You’ll hear me say, with a light heart and a laugh, that we have enough diversity here to irritate everybody. That is just what it is to offer diverse gifts: we need us all for the ministry God entrusts to us. Sanctifying grace, growing in holiness, is discerning and using our many gifts for the mission of Jesus Christ.

In this morning’s children’s sermon I gave each child a dollar and asked it be a “sharing dollar” to help someone in need. Now I make the same request of you. Only I am not giving the 100+ people here in worship a dollar! But I am asking you to consider your gifts—time, talent and treasure—and answer this question: *If you are blessed, “what” will you share and “how” will you share that blessing with others?*” I’d love to hear, in conversation or e-mail, your answers. Either way, our responses are what sanctifying grace is all about: a journey of discernment and self-giving love until the day we meet the Master, with the hope we hear “*Well done, thou good and faithful servant.*” Amen.