

Lost and Found

Luke 15:1-10

Crossroads Christian Church

1 Timothy 1:12-17

September 15, 2013

By Michael E. Dixon

Pentecost 16A

“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.”

That’s on most people’s top ten favorite hymn list, I think. We sing it, and often we hear it at funerals. It’s a great description of how God’s love can transform our lives.

The story behind it is one you may have already heard, but it’s a great story and worthy to hear again. The hymn is born from the life of a man who was a wretched man a moral pariah, a man engaged in an evil trade, one whom God rescued, one to whom God truly showed amazing grace.

John Newton, like many English youth in the 1800s, went to sea at the age of 11. When he was 18, he was conscripted into the British navy, but he deserted. Looking for work, he joined the crew of an English slave ship.

Slavers would make the first leg of their voyage from England nearly empty until they would anchor off the African coast. There they would buy slaves captured by rival tribal chiefs, or they would capture unwary Africans themselves. Then the captives would be loaded aboard, packed for sailing. They were chained below decks to prevent suicides, laid side by side to save space, row after row, one after another, until the ship was laden with as many as 600 units of human cargo. He dealt in human misery. He made a living by buying and selling other human beings as property.

One day, he found a book on board--Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. It planted the seeds of his conversion. When the ship nearly foundered in a storm, John Newton gave his life to Christ. Later he was promoted to captain of a slave ship. Doesn't that sound like a strange job for a new Christian? But finally he realized the evil of what he was doing, and he left the sea for good.

Later, he studied for the ministry. For the last 43 years of his life he preached the gospel in Olney and London. At 82, Newton said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour." He became captivated by his understanding of God's grace--the completely undeserved mercy and favor of God.

Newton's tombstone reads, "John Newton, Cleric, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to destroy."

John Newton experienced the joy of having God forgive his sins and having God transform his life, and he's one of the saints in heaven. St. Paul probably gave him a special welcome at heaven's gates, because their stories were so much alike. Saul of Tarsus had been a religious bigot, a fanatic who condemned those who didn't agree with his own interpretation. We have a lot those today in almost any religion, don't we? He tried to justify himself to God by hunting down those whom he thought were God's enemies. Then he met the living Christ on the road to Damascus, and his life was transformed—not by anything he had done to deserve it, but by God's grace alone.

In a way, John Newton's story was a retelling of Paul's story, a great sinner becoming a saint, not by his own power, but by God's grace. Paul summarizes the story in 1 Timothy 1:12-14. Here it is from the Message. "I'm so grateful to Christ Jesus for making me adequate to do this work. He went out on a limb, you know, in trusting me with this ministry. The only credentials I brought to it were invective and witch hunts and arrogance. But I was treated mercifully because I didn't know what I was doing—didn't know Who I was doing it against! Grace mixed with faith and love poured over me and into me. And all because of Jesus."

Isn't God amazing? In our Gospel lesson, Jesus challenged the pride, prejudice, and preconceptions of the good people of his community—the people like us. They had been raising their eyebrows and sniffing, because Jesus was obviously hanging out with the wrong crowd. Didn't he know losers when he saw them? Why should he be so friendly with people who were obviously immoral, who lived outside the law and the expectations of good society? "Birds of a feather flock together," they would likely say.

Jesus, however, saw things from a different perspective. What kind of physician would it be who couldn't be bothered by sick people? There were, there are, so many people who had given up in despair of ever being loved by God. There had been too many compromises, too many wrong choices, too many disappointments, too many sins for God to love them, they had thought. But here is Jesus, treating them like a friend. So when Jesus is down there with the loan sharks and the hookers, the good people, the people like us, raise their eyebrows. And Jesus tells them three stories, all with the same point. We only heard the first two today, a story about a shepherd who loses a sheep, and

a story about a woman who loses a coin. They desperately search to find what is missing, and they are so overjoyed by it that they throw parties, they invite their friends over for food and drink, they sing, they laugh, they dance. And the third story, the climax of the three, you know, for it is the most tender, poignant, and surprising of all. For what is lost in that story is not a sheep, not a coin, but a son. The son walks away from his home, abandons his family, and squanders everything, and comes home in disgrace, hoping to be accepted as a slave. His father rushes to meet him, treats him like visiting royalty, and throws a party!

Jesus tells these stories to show us what God is like. God seeks us out and tries to love us back into relationship, into new life, into transformed life, because that's who God is. God wants all of us to come back home, whether sinner or saint-in-process. And God wants to throw a party. When Jesus described God's coming reign, he described it as an eternal party, a banquet, a time of fullness and rejoicing, of singing and laughing. "When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun."

Several years back, I was at a meeting of denominational youth workers from different parts of the US and Canada. There were maybe two dozen of us, staying at a retreat center. We'd been out to eat, and we stopped off at an ice cream parlor for dessert. We knew each other well, and we were laughing and joking and having a good time. Two older ladies came up to us and smiled, "I bet that you're part of a church group, aren't you?" one asked. "Yes," I said. "How could you tell?"

"Because you were enjoying yourselves so much, but you're still being nice to one another and not

badmouthing others.” And the other lady smiled and said, “What church do you go to? I might like to try it!”

What church are we? The church of lost sheep, lost coins, lost children who have been found. The church of shepherds and housewives and parents celebrating the return of something precious and lost. The church of older brothers and sisters who are still trying to sort out our feelings and trying to decide whether the party is for us, too.

In these stories, Jesus reminds us that we should be open to love and accept others, even those we might not assume would be on God’s guest list—people that we raise our eyebrows at. For God’s guest list is a whole lot longer than ours. Jesus reminds us that God’s grace is so amazing, so overwhelming, that God can transform the darker corners of our own lives, and accept us even when we don’t feel so acceptable. Jesus reminds us to respond to God’s amazing grace with joy and celebration, to help get us in the mood for the great party that is to come, and to encourage others to say, “What church do you go to? I might like to try it!”