

ALTARED LIFE: The Spotlight of Grace

John 3:14-21

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Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/altared-life-the-spotlight-of-grace/

I.

A few years ago, Pastor Jonathan Davis shared about a time when his nearly 6-year-old son was very angry with his mother. It was time for bed, which meant it was time to turn off the TV, but the little boy wasn't ready. He began his protests, the ones every parent is familiar with. He shouted, wailed, stomped, knocked books to the ground, and walked away as if to say, "Someone else will have to clean up this mess."

And then, he reached for his last tool in the shed, the last weapon in his arsenal. His only hope and every parent's worst nightmare. The one thing that will pierce the heart of the strongest parent, aunt, uncle, and grandparent.

He shouted from the top of the stairs – "I hate you. I don't love you anymore. I wish you weren't my mother. I wish I had a different mother than you."

It is a devastating and wounding phrase, even when we know it is spoken from a small body overwhelmed with big emotions.

The child ran into his bedroom, threw himself on the bed, and hid under the covers. The child's mother gathered her composure, climbed the stairs, and called him by name. Finding him under the covers, she asked to see his face. To look him in the eyes.

Then, with a tender, quiet, and steady voice, his mother said, "That may very well be true. But even if you don't love me and wish I weren't your mother, I will love you no matter what. Do you understand that? I will always love you."

As each word was spoken, the young boy nodded, eyes wide in longing but also fear. Something is frightening about that kind of fierce love. Is it true? Can that kind of love exist? Can it exist for me? A love we are entirely powerless to ruin no matter what we say and do.

It wasn't long before the mother lifted the boy, all 45 pounds of him, to herself and embraced him in her arms.

Standing on the sidelines that evening, Pastor Davis said he felt like he watched the entire story of God and God's people unfold before his eyes. He felt like he watched the most famous verse of the Bible – John 3:16 – come to life.ⁱ

II.

You know the verse. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (v. 16) Arguably the most well-known bible verse of all time. People will hang it on the wall, get it as a tattoo, put it on a bumper sticker, or hold it up on a big sign at sporting events. You can even buy this nifty necktie with the whole verse printed for \$5.49, plus \$3.99 for shipping and handling.

Some of you owned this tie. Some of you wouldn't be caught dead in a darkened alley with that tie on, which is where we find Nicodemus and Jesus in our reading today. Well, maybe not an alley, but the story does take place under the cover of night. We don't know a lot about Nicodemus, but we know he was a well-known and influential Jewish leader, a religious VIP. While some people think it is cool to be well-known, it makes it hard when you want to go unnoticed, which is why Nicodemus waits until dark to see the new rabbi everyone is talking about. He needs to see and speak to Jesus for himself.

III.

At the beginning of our text today, one verse before the famous verse, Jesus reminds Nicodemus of a strange Hebrew story about serpents. After God rescued the Israelites from captivity, they wandered in the wilderness for almost 40 years because of their lack of faith. God provided for their needs as they wandered, yet it wasn't enough. God provided food, but the people didn't like it. God brought them out of slavery, but the people long for the good old days of Egypt. They complain loudly to Moses and God.

It reminds me of those photos of funny reasons why kids cry (like when it is bedtime)

- The dog was in the way while he was trying to push the chair.
- He didn't want to share his leg hole in the cart with his sister.
- I wouldn't let him finish eating dirt.
- I can't fix his cracker.

God was fed up with the Israelites' lack of faith and navel-gazing whining. God had brought them through the worst, but they still failed to trust God. Consequently, the story goes that deadly, fiery snakes start biting Israelites, and many die. Terrified, the people repent of their ways and ask Moses to plead to God again. And God answers. God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it up where everyone can see it. When the bitten Israelites look up to the serpent, they are healed. It is through seeing and knowing where to turn their attention that they are saved and will live. God is asking them to trust God again.

Jesus reminds Nicodemus of this story that night and adds to it, saying, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (3:15).

The serpent and the cross, two images of suffering and death, will become avenues of healing and salvation. When we look at the cross, we see an imperial tool of torture and death. We see humanity's brokenness, how humans can hurt one another, and how empires respond when their power is threatened. But we also see Christ on the cross, and if we truly see, we'll see just

how far God will go in love to heal and save our world from our sins, our brokenness, the very things killing us. It is through seeing and knowing where to turn our attention that we are saved and thereby live.

IV.

Like the Israelites, we're called to come out from under the covers of unfaithfulness, self-centeredness, and fear into the light to be healed and saved. Like Nicodemus, we're called out from the shadows of law into the light of grace to be healed and saved. The dark isn't evil, but sometimes we use it to hide, to pull up the covers over what we don't want to be seen or known in the light of day.

The invitation of Christ is to come to the light, to allow Christ to draw us into a place where we can be fully seen and known, where we can unhide ourselves, where the spotlight of grace shines on us, and we trust that we are still loved even when all is exposed.

Like that sweet mom with her young son, God in Christ calls us by name out from underneath the covers and says, "Even if you don't love me and even if you wish I weren't your God, I will love you no matter what. Do you understand that? I will always love you."

For God has shown God's love for the world, yes, even the world that screams, "I hate you. I don't love you anymore. I wish you weren't my God. I wish I had a different god than you." God has shown God's love for this world in this way: God lifted up God's only Son, not coerced but in unity among the Father, Son, and Spirit, so that whoever sees him, believes in him, turns their attention and life to him, should not perish but have eternal life, a life we begin to inhabit now as we enter into relationship with Christ in our ordinary, everyday lives. Eternal life has no end but begins right here and now because this is where God first embraces us.

I don't know for sure, but I imagine that after the little boy allowed his mom to embrace him, assuring him of her love for him, they eventually walked back downstairs together and began restoring the things he had done. The books were put back on the shelves, and the pillows on the couch. But the boy couldn't take back the words he'd thrown. There are some things we can't restore when we lash out at others and God. But even those words sit under the spotlight of grace. The forgiveness of those words will come from the compassionate love of a parent who sees beyond the words to the hurting heart of their child. The forgiveness of those words will come from a heartbroken child who trusts that their parent's love is a love entirely powerless to ruin no matter what they say and do. This is grace. Where we expect and deserve judgment, we are met instead with love.

But had the boy refused his mother's embrace, had he refused to believe she still loved him despite how he acted, had he stayed under those covers, he would have missed out on the grace and love he so desperately wanted. The boy, not the mom, would have condemned or punished himself by his refusal to come to the light and receive the love and grace freely offered to him.

Jesus didn't come to condemn but to save. Not believing in Christ's grace and love means condemning or sentencing ourselves. It is pulling the covers up over our heads because we refuse, out of pride or fear, to be fully seen, known, and loved by God in Christ. Thus, we miss how Christ's love and amazing grace set us free to live in the here and now.

V.

The well-known hymn *Amazing Grace* was written by an Englishman named John Newton. Newton was born in London in 1725, the son of a Puritan mother and a stern ship commander father who took him to sea when he was 11. Of his father, Newton wrote, "I am persuaded that he loved me, but he seemed not willing that I should know it." Some of you had a parent like this.ⁱⁱ

After many sea voyages as a young man, Newton sailed on a slave ship. Eventually, he was treated as a slave himself. He worked along with black slaves -- poorly fed, poorly clothed, unpaid -- for about a year before another white slave trader rescued him and later returned to England on the ship *Greyhound*.

On that ship, John returned to his Christian roots, but his views on slavery were not altered. By 1745, Newton was enlisted in the slave trade, running captured slaves from Africa to Europe and the colonies. He would retreat to his cabin to study his Bible and write tender love letters to his wife while hundreds of slaves lie in chains in the hold belowⁱⁱⁱ, slaves Newton confessed to sometimes treating horrifically while in his possession.

After suffering a stroke and another divine moment, Newton retired from the slave trade and seafaring life. He was ordained an Anglican priest in 1764, and his views on slavery began to change. Eventually, he became an essential voice in the English abolitionist movement to end slavery. In December 1772, he wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace* about his experience with God's grace. In his last years, Newton fought to abolish the African slave trade. He described the horrors of the slave trade in a tract he wrote supporting the campaign. He lived to see the Slave Trade Act passed in March 1807, which ended England's participation in the slave trade, dying nine months later.

Newton was hidden under the covers of anger, greed, pleasure, and eventually shame, unaware of a parent who, unlike his dad, not only loved him but was also willing to show him just how much he loved him. God sat beside Newton, pulled back the covers, and told him of God's love for him, visible through the grace and love of Jesus Christ, lifted high on the cross. And in seeing and believing, Newton found healing and eternal life in the here and now. God and Newton returned downstairs together to do the hard work of putting back what they could from his sin. He fought to make the slave trade illegal; he spoke honestly about his part in it; he brought all the horrors he had committed out into the light and found God's love is a love entirely powerless to ruin no matter what we say and do. But there was a limit to what John could restore. He could not take back the hundreds if not thousands, of black men and women he took from families and homes. He could not take back the atrocious things he did or said to those children of God made in the image of God. He later wrote: "a confession, which ... comes

too late ... It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders." There are some words and actions that cannot be put back. But even those words and actions sit under the spotlight of grace. God's grace taught Newton's heart to fear the punishment of his sin, and God's grace also relieved those fears. Where we expect and deserve judgment, we are met with love. This is grace. Amazing grace.

VI.

How will the world know God loves them? Because we love them. We testify to a love that is entirely powerless to ruin no matter what we say and do. We love as Jesus loved; we do as Jesus has done to us. Our role is to partner with God to restore what is broken and needs to be put back in place. Our work is to be safe places where we and others can come out from under the covers and out of the shadows into the light of Christ's grace and love. Our task is to expose the evil in the world and the systems that abuse and oppress. Our mission is to look to Christ and shine the spotlight of grace everywhere we go for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://jdshankles.wordpress.com/2021/03/17/sunday-march-14th-2021-state-of-love-and-trust-a-sermon-on-john-314-21/>

ⁱⁱ <https://time.com/3939193/amazing-grace-history-john-newton/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://haventoday.org/product/amazing-grace-hardcover/>