

“Amazing Grace”

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5th Sunday Worship: Our Stories

First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington, Vermont

Today I want to talk with you about Amazing Grace . . . *(Piano plays notes from Amazing Grace.)*

You know the music, but I want to talk about Amazing Grace as my personal connection to the music and the spiritual concept.

As current members and friends of First Congregational Church, you are familiar with the YETS Program (the Youth Experience in Travel and Service). Years ago, when I was growing up I this church, the YETS Program was preceded by the “Travelers” Program (the Travelers Institute for International Understanding). Each summer, a group of high school youth traveled to Europe with Reverend George Lawrence and his wife, Nancy.

Why Europe? Well, Reverend Lawrence received his PhD. in theology from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. The major focus of this travel was to visit the churches of Dr. Lawrence’s former colleagues. As we were hosted by the families of those churches, we shared in worship and community activities with the members of our host churches. A part of our contribution to this exchange was to sing as a choir.

As many of you know, this choir loft behind the pulpit [in our Sanctuary] is affectionately referred to as “the bathtub” and this is where the high school choir used to sing and where I became personally acquainted with the singing of Amazing Grace, under the FIRM direction of Nancy Lawrence, because it was part of our repertoire.

Well as “Travelers”, we sang for our supper across Scotland, England and Ireland. That music, and those lyrics have been dear to, and engrained in, me ever since.

“How Sweet the Sound that Saved a Wretch Like Me” . . . *(Piano plays notes from Amazing Grace.)*

Wretch! Now there’s a word. There are several definitions to choose from:

- A deplorably unfortunate or unhappy person; or perhaps,
- A banished person, exile or outcast pitied for their distress or misfortune.

So how do I qualify? And what are the dangers, toils and snares through which I have already come? So without all the gory details, a short list includes:

- The death of my father at way too young early and age, and a family rescued and supported by this congregation;
- A failed marriage replaced by a cherished one; and
- Survival of a collision at sea where my survival facilitated the survival of many other shipmates.

“How Precious Did that Grace Appear the Hour I First Believed”. *(Piano plays notes from Amazing Grace.)*

This is where I want to ask, and for you to consider, how long does that HOUR take? I ask because amidst the joys and tribulations of life, there dawns an awareness, a sense of recognition of the good stuff at work in your life. When you can say to yourself “There is something at work here more than what I did for myself”, the recognition of Grace occurs. Your HOUR has chimed.

As a spiritual gift, this is when the gift of Grace gets even better . . . because . . . it has been my experience, that upon reflection, there has been a progression from a dim, distant sense of God’s impact on my life to a more current, active recognition of, and appreciation for, God’s gifts.

An analogy perhaps: My proposition to you is that once you become aware of how Grace feels when it happens, the sooner you recognize it with each new opportunity. In this way, your sense of awareness to recognize and appreciate Grace functions as your spiritual immune system. Once exposed to a spiritual antigen, your response is enhanced.

My Affirmation Is This: I am the recipient of Grace. And for this, I am thankful. I offer thanks and praise to my God – the giver of life’s gifts. May your spiritual health be robust.

Amen.