

“SONGS OF THE SAVIOR: III – ‘AMAZING GRACE’”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Fourth Sunday of Lent
John 3:14-21

“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
my soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
for the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day’s
most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely as they turn from praise.
I love with a passion put to use
in my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
with my lost saints – I love thee with the breath,
smiles, tears, of all my life! – and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.”

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1850

I don’t know how many of you learned that sonnet in English class, but it is one of the greatest pieces of literature written about love, and it was written by the hand of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Elizabeth was born in England in 1806, the daughter of Mary and Edward Barrett, a man who made his fortune in sugar plantations in Jamaica. Though he made his money in Jamaica, the Barretts made their home in England.

Edward Barrett was a stern and at times cruel man. Elizabeth, sometime in her teens, she became sickly – confined by a lung disease. Other maladies affected her as she grew up, and then an accident and some tragedies in her life, plunged her into despair, and a life of seclusion. When she was in her 20's her mother died, and then she was alone with her father. Though her life was sad, and her struggles many, she continued the writing she had begun in her early years, and published magnificent works such as that sonnet I read earlier.

A man by the name of Robert Browning became a fan of her writing, and one day, wrote to tell her so. They eventually met in person, and fell in love, though he was many years her junior. When she was 40, they had a secret wedding ceremony (since her father was vehemently opposed to the marriage), and thereafter they moved to Italy, where they would live the rest of their lives.

But from the moment Elizabeth married, her father refused to speak to her, and it broke her heart. Time and again, she would write him letters, hoping to somehow touch him and restore their relationship. She wrote him weekly for years and years, and then, one day, after 10 years of writing to him, she received a box in the mail – a large box. When she opened it up, she discovered all of the letters she had written to her father – not one of them opened!

How incredibly sad – a gift repeatedly offered, left unopened forever.

Friends, there's a gift in this morning's Gospel lesson, a great gift – the greatest gift any of us can ever receive – the gift of everlasting life through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, our Lord and Savior – and far too many people leave it unopened. It's right there for the asking, and they don't receive it. How incredibly sad!

You know, I'm always amazed at the way God works and God's timing. This past Monday, I was working with a group of eight Cub Scouts on their God and Me award. This was the third of five classes I'm doing with them – and I am really enjoying it. They are great kids.

At any rate, amazingly, this week's lesson started with us talking about gifts – gifts we have received, gifts we have given, and this, the greatest gift of all – the gift of Jesus. And guess what the main scripture lesson for this chapter was? You guessed it – John 3:16. Amazing!

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” (Sorry, but I always seem to slip back into the King James Version – that’s how I memorized it!)

What a gift – the gift of Jesus, who came to save us from our sins, not to condemn us to eternal damnation because of our wrongdoing, but to save us – and give us everlasting life. It’s a life-saving gift – yet, so many people do not receive it, do not open it – for so many different reasons –

But the one reason I want to talk about this morning is unforgiveness. They can’t receive this gift from God because they either a) feel they can’t be forgiven for a sin or sins they have committed; or b) they can’t forgive someone else who has sinned against them. Forgiveness or the lack thereof is a huge problem for so many of us.

Do you know that the famed psychiatrist Karl Menninger once said that “if he could convince his patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven,

75% of them could walk out the next day?” (On-line, Sermonillustrations.com, “forgiveness”)

So many people do struggle with forgiveness. We’re burdened by sin – we heard about it in verse 19 of the lesson: “This is the judgment, that light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

We get that, don’t we? In a wonderful essay on this scripture passage, Janet Hunt writes, “While we might like to believe otherwise, it goes without saying that each and every one of us has something we prefer not to be exposed to the light. There are parts and places of ourselves, our experiences, our histories, our foibles, we would not want to risk to the harsh light of the scrutiny of others.” (On-line, “Dancing with the Word: Light and Darkness,” Janet Hunt)

We struggle with our sin, and sometimes, we struggle to give it up by confessing and asking for God’s forgiveness. Why? Maybe because we’re ashamed or think we’re unworthy, we don’t deserve forgiveness, that if God really, truly knew the kind of person we were deep down inside, there’s no way He could forgive us.

And so, we keep it closed up inside of us, never exposing it to the light of God's love in Jesus Christ.

And when it comes to not forgiving someone else – there are many reasons for that, as well. We won't forgive them until they ask for it, or we want to hold a grudge and keep what we see as control over them, or we won't forgive and start fresh because we want to make sure it never happens to us again – and on and on the cycle of unforgiveness goes.

And the sad thing about it all – unforgiveness because of our own sin, and because we won't forgive those who have sinned against us – the sad thing is that it means we never open the gift of grace God offers us in Jesus Christ – the gift of forgiveness, the gift of life – full, real, abundant, everlasting life.

There's a woman named Stephanie Palmer who could tell us what it's like to open that gift. Stephanie was living a nice, normal life with her husband and children in Houston, Texas, until that day in 1993 when a robber broke into their house, forced Stephanie and her children to lay down on the floor (her husband was

away at the time), and when Stephanie raised her head to check on her children, he shot her in the face.

She was seriously wounded, and seriously disfigured for life. But she found a way to go on, with the love and support of her family and friends. When it came time for the trial of the man who had done this to her, Stephanie went to court. When it came time to make her victim-impact statement, she stood up, looked directly at the man who had changed her life forever, and said these words: “I think there’s only one thing left for me to say, and that is, that I forgive you.” Well, people were shocked!

And the one who told her story, James Moore, said that “if we went to Stephanie Palmer today and asked her, ‘Why did you forgive that man who did that awful thing to you?’ she would say, ‘Because I am a Christian. Because I serve him who said, ‘Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.’ Because I follow the One who, even as he was being crucified, said from a cross, ‘Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.’” (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, “The Attitude of Trust,” p. 99)

Stephanie Palmer has opened the gift of God's amazing grace in Jesus Christ. He has transformed her, and carries her through everything life brings her way, and the abundant, real, eternal life she knows now will one day be everlasting life for all eternity. That's the great gift of God, the amazing grace of Jesus Christ our Lord – that same grace that the writer of "Amazing Grace," John Newton knew, after he gave up his sinful life of owning slaves.

So the question today, for all of us as we continue on this journey through Lent, is this: Have you opened the gift? Have you received God's amazing grace poured out in Jesus Christ, for you and your salvation?

Or is it still unopened, maybe because of sin and unforgiveness in your life?

This week, as we have on all the Sundays of Lent, we will spend some time in silence and contemplation. Today, we will think about forgiveness or the lack thereof. In your bulletins you will find an insert on which is a dove holding an olive branch in its mouth – a beautiful symbol of the peace that comes from forgiveness, grace and a life in Christ. Take that insert out and find something with which to write – a pen or a pencil. I'll give you a moment to do that.

Now, spend some time considering these questions: Have you opened God's gift of amazing grace to you – Jesus the Christ? If you haven't, what is keeping you from saying yes to Him?

Whatever it is that today is blocking you from realizing the fullness of God's gift in Christ, write it down. If it's sin you have committed, sin that is blocking you, sin that you have not confessed, write it down. If it's a grudge against someone else, a sin against you that you will not forgive, write it down. Whatever it is – whatever it is that keeps you from fully accepting the peace that only God can give through Jesus Christ – write it down – and then, give it to God. Trust in the depth of His mercy for you. Trust that He knows you through and through and loves you still. Receive the gift of life from Him this day. And if you feel so moved, during the singing of the hymn following this time of silence, come to the altar rail and pray.

My friends, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son for you – that you might not perish – but have everlasting life."

In silence now, think about your life and be with God.