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"Amazing Grace" The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (07/07/2024, The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost)

If you have young children, or if you've ever seen a young child playing on the playground, you have probably at some point experienced this phenomenon I'm about to describe.

Child falls and scrapes its knee, and there's like this hanging split second,

where you don't know how they're going to react.

And of course they look at that moment at their parent, and if their parent's face is like,

then the child just freaks out and starts screaming and crying and runs into the arms of the parent, and if the parent's face is like, then usually the child is not quite as dramatic.

There is something in the reaction that the child mimics or sort of looks at in notices.

Maybe you've at some point shared news with a friend that to you was really good news

and something you were delighted to share with them, and then you were quite disappointed

when they didn't react the way that you wanted them to, the way that you expected them to,

or you've given someone a gift that you would work really hard and thought about,

and you said this is crafted perfectly for this person,

and then they did not react the way that you expected, the way that you hoped them to.

Maybe now we think about reactions often in like, there's a meme or a video I want to show you,

I pull up my phone, I hold it up, I say, this is hilarious, you have to watch this,

and then I don't watch the video, I watch you, because I want to see how you react

to this thing that I have found joy or laughter or silliness or whatever the case might be.

We are often asked by someone else to watch and to see if we're reacting the way

that they want us to react. I think it's really natural to do this.

We want to share the things that we're going to enjoy in life and we want people to enjoy them too,

and so we watch for their reaction.

We also know that there are often people watching us to see what our

reactions are to certain things in life,
and sometimes that can produce anxiety in us, right?
We're constantly aware of how people are proceeding us and watching
our reactions.
We want to be liked, we want to be successful, we want to cultivate
good relationships in our lives,
we want to fit in with the world around us, and that desire often
shapes our reactions to various things.
Just look at any group of teenagers.
The amount of sheer confidence on the outside is only matched by the
incredible insecurity inside.
There's this constant negotiation happening.
Should I laugh at that joke or not?
Were they being ironic or sincere?
Will they be offended if I don't think that that's very funny?
And on and on, it goes, this happens a lot in life, probably for many
reasons.
We're an imitative species to the point that we often don't have any
idea that we are communicating some sort of reaction.
We don't realize the extent to which we might be matching the non-
verbal communication of the people around us.
Again, here's a sociological experiment for you.
Stand around in a group of people and then realize that after a few
minutes you're all folding your arms like this.
Someone did it first and then other people did it and they didn't even
realize that they were doing it.
It's just imitation.
These things give us a window sometimes and how different we are from
other people.
They can make us feel isolated or alienated from others or from a
group.
Often the way that other people react can also give us an insight into
how judgmental we can be.
When we see that they are not enjoying the thing that we're supposed
to enjoy.
A few weeks ago I was talking with the Reverend Aaron Zimmerman and I
brought up the show Brooklyn 9.9,
which I think we all agree is the best comedy ever made.
And he doesn't feel that way and I was so disappointed at his
reaction.
This sort of thing happens all the time in the religious life as well.
It happens all the time in the church and sometimes for some of us it
is the source of a deep trauma.
We remember what it was like to stand in a space where everyone seems
to be reacting the same way or feeling the same feelings.
And we weren't feeling those feelings and we weren't reacting that
way.
This can produce not only confusion and alienation but this real
spiritual challenge because inevitably we blame ourselves.
It must be me. I need to get right with God.

I must have some unconfessed sin. I must have something that's blocking my spirit from reacting in the way that all these other people are.

God is looking at me in this moment and saying something is wrong with me.

I've always been fascinated by the stories of how people come to faith in Jesus and how their path toward God meanders through the various ups and downs of life and how the spirit eventually grabs hold of people and what it was that helps them to see the love of God in this beautiful and compelling way.

And I'm also fascinated by stories of people who have left the church for various reasons.

What was it that they found lacking? How did the story of God's love become twisted and complicated enough that they no longer had a space for it in their lives?

How did people's reactions or lack of reactions affect this person's faith?

Last weekend I was in the process of dismantling a treadmill. Don't ask.

It took about three hours. It was like a three-hour project and so I had NPR on as I was listening to this American life.

They dedicated an entire hour long episode to one story. A story of a second generation Chinese American named Bowen Wang.

Bowen's parents moved from the huge city of Beijing to Norman, Oklahoma in the 1990s to pursue graduate studies at University of Oklahoma.

Bowen's dad arrives at the O.K.C. airport alone and confused and meets someone who leads him to Christ. He becomes a Christian and so both parents become Christians.

They raise Bowen in the church but Bowen as now a young man considers no longer to be himself a Christian.

This episode was dedicated to exploring this key autobiographical question that's been on his mind ever since he left the church.

What would be different about my life now if my father hadn't met that man in the Oklahoma City airport? Would it be better? Would it be worse? Would it even make a difference?

And so at one point in his exploration, in his digging up this stuff, he reaches deep into his own religious trauma to uncover what it was about his upbringing in the church that affected him so negatively.

And he says this, sometimes I whisper it to myself, I'm a worthless piece of junk. I hate myself. This is the main thing I learned from Christianity that I'm a worthless piece of junk.

And listen, he says, I know that's not the main message of the gospel. I know Jesus teaches us that we're all redeemed by his sacrifice, that we're all children of God, but all that nice feel-good stuff bounced right off of me.

I learned to hate myself. I need to punish myself every moment of every waking hour of every day for my sinfulness, which morphs into a need to punish myself for anything I've ever done that's vaguely embarrassing.

The Christian difference he concludes is a belief that my existence is fundamentally wrong. The Christian difference is a need to punish myself for my existence.

At some point, Bowen and many others who have grown up in the church internalize this understanding of themselves as broken beyond repair, that the love of God in Jesus Christ is really not for them, that it's only for the people who can react in the right ways, who can say the right things.

That God only loves us once we get rid of our sin and do these right things and get into this right place spiritually so that we are holy and pure, that God doesn't really love us as we are in all of our flawed incompleteness, that really fundamentally God can only love those who have succeeded in the Christian life, the winners, and God only tolerates the failures and the losers, but is waiting to punish them if they don't get it right.

And this is tragic because all of what I've just said is completely wrong, totally alien to this faith that I love and that has formed and shaped me within this religious tradition, and also none of what I've just said is really that new in our faith.

The Apostle Paul himself converted by this miraculous appearance of Jesus that thundered from the heavens and literally threw him off of his horse, continued to struggle with what it really meant for God's love and mercy and grace to be poured out on everyone without limit and without preconditions.

Even in those early, early days of the faith, there were already those who were willing to say that only certain types of outward displays of faith were for real Christians, that only people who manifested certain signs of the spirit or felt or experienced certain things were truly touched by God, that their reactions were the right ones, and the people who weren't experiencing those things must not have enough faith or the right faith.

Or it must have some other kind of weakness or deficiency.

And these kinds of features had been actively influencing the Corinthian church, apparently, and so Paul in our reading from this morning wants to bring them a crucial message.

That even though 14 years ago, he himself had this profound mystical experience of God's presence, something that brought him near to God in a way that he still cannot explain.

Even this does not single him out as a super-Christian, nor does it mean that there is something wrong with those who haven't experienced something like he did.

Paul's experience of the powerful presence and love of God was followed for the next 14 years and for the rest of his life by loss, not gain, by failure, not success, by weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

The proof of God's love and grace and favor to Paul was not given in a way that would automatically signal that he was somehow favored or privileged.

It was just the opposite, in fact.

And so Paul becomes an important figure in the life of our faith for

this powerful and powerfully true insight.

My grace, Jesus says, is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in weakness.

What is this power that's alluded to? My power is made perfect in what is he talking about?

This power, it's the power of creation, it's the power that holds together in Adam, it's the power that holds everything in the universe together.

It's the power that brought you into being and that stands ready to welcome you at the end.

It's the power of love, of laughter, of joy, the power that welcomes home a prodigal child who has been away for a very long time.

It's the power of love and it is made real and present, it's turned up to 11, it is made whole and complete in your life and mine.

Paul says, and I really do think he knew what he was talking about.

This power is made whole and complete in weakness.

Whenever I am weak, I am strong, whenever I am fearful and afraid and small, whenever I have profound doubts.

Whenever I don't seem to be feeling the things that others are feeling, experiencing the things that others are experiencing, seeing the things that others are seeing.

Whenever I feel small and confused, whenever I feel insignificant, whenever I seem only to fail, whenever I am facing more than I know what to do with.

Whenever is the psalmist says, all the breakers and waves of life are crashing over me.

Whenever I can't muster enough faith even to pray, whenever I am lonely, whenever I am in that season of life in which it seems impossible that God could love me.

Jesus shows up in all of those places and for all of those people.

Why could Jesus do no deed of power in his own hometown?

It's not because he came back for his 20-year high school reunion as the Son of God and was like, hey, everybody, if you teased me in the past, I have some news for you.

I'm so much cooler than you are now.

I'm literally the Son of God.

It's not because he wanted to punish them.

He wanted to show them the power of God.

He wanted them to have the right reaction, the reaction of open hands and open hearts, the reaction that says, Jesus, I am sick, I am worn, I am weary, I am tired, I am confused, I need you, I need a healer.

I need a savior. Jesus wanted that for them, but they thought they were just fine.

They were content with being self-sufficient.

They thought the presence and power of God belonged in the hands of real winners, not a loser from this town.

They simply couldn't believe that God would choose to work in and through this laborer from their own town, this kid, this upstart prophet who could claim to no real authority.

His parentage was questionable. God wouldn't do that. God couldn't do

that.

But God would, and God did.

I've become more and more convinced with each passing year that the kingdom of God really is a glorious and heavenly joke.

And the job of the church is to be in on the joke.

The church appears to be small and insignificant to the place where all the weak and failed go for some kind of comfort in their weakness.

The church appears to be on the losing side of history which privileges power and control and dominance and force.

But from the beginning, Paul and the other apostles were in on the joke.

They were beaten and tortured and crucified, shipwrecked and put in prison, their dignity and worth always being taken from them.

The church worships a crucified God, put to death by the powers who really run the world, the powers who hold the world and check with their violence and coercive authority.

And it is great and glorious joke God smiles because God knows the truth.

That the kingdoms of the earth and their death-dealing ways are doomed to fail.

And that this crucified God is risen and exalted and that he heals the weak and the faint-hearted and brings them out of death and into life.

I'll close with a quotation from Abbott's Andre Luf.

He says, it is not the person who knows and is able to do things who practices faith.

Instead, faith is found in the one who yields and surrenders, lowers their arms, drops their weapons.

And with their whole body and all their possessions, they deliver themselves up to love.

His grace is sufficient for us. His power is made perfect in weakness.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you love us and you love us in and with all of our failings.

We thank you for your grace and we thank you that it is perfected in each one of our broken and fragile lives. Amen.