

# From Wretchedness to the Banquet of Joy

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,  
at the eleven o'clock service, April 3, 2011, The Fourth Sunday in Lent.  
Based on John 9:1-41.*

It is a long way from the dry dust of Ash Wednesday to the spittle and dust used by Jesus to make a blind man see on this the Fourth Sunday of Lent. The truth is, it usually is a long, arduous way from blindness to sight, but it is always worth the trip. Anybody who is old enough to "get" this wonderful story from the book of John is old enough to remember having been blind as a bat on occasion and then by the grace of God—or whatever we may have called it at the moment—being given the gift of sight. For most of us it is not a one time cure, which is to say we move in and out of blindness, but the moments when we do see the light are so luminous, so bright and bold that the choice to live exclusively in darkness is never acceptable to us. Once we have seen the light, we can't live without it.

"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."

Most of us know the story of "Amazing Grace," of how John Newton, the slave trader, was dramatically converted after a harrowing, near-death experience on his ship. His story and his words are wonderfully compelling, made even more so by the haunting tune that eventually came to accompany the words. But the pervasive way in which it has been treasured in our culture is truly extraordinary. Elizabeth Taylor, who converted many years ago to Judaism, asked that her grandson play at her funeral this great old Christian hymn on his trumpet. In the world of popular music, Judy Collins' name is synonymous with her recording of "Amazing Grace" 40 years ago, a recording that remained at the top of the charts in the UK and here for over a year and has never lost its popularity.

Several years after Bill Moyer's award winning documentary devoted to answering the question of why this hymn about being blind and coming to see has such indelible resonance for us, he sat down again with Judy Collins to revisit the topic. In that conversation she spoke movingly about the hymn's use of the word "wretch," "a wretch like me." "Wretch" is a word that has caught in my own throat every time I have ever sung it or heard it, but Collins' take on it has redeemed its use for me in a way that nothing else ever has.

Far from shying away from the word, she claims it as the launching pad for transformation, as the place where we know we are without options, at the end of the road with nowhere to turn, but also a place from which real transformation can be ignited. Having known more than her share of dramatic ups and downs in her life, beginning with her own serious suicide attempt at the age of 14, Collins speaks with some authority. She knows what it feels like to need a new beginning. And so do we; we know it in the details of our stories. We have known moments when we have languished in wretched circumstances—sometimes of our own making, sometimes just the twists and turns of life—only to have some piercing moment of grace that suddenly enables us to see. Judy Collins claims that what gives us hope is to live life in the understanding that "the vision of salvation is ever present" before us.

I think she is right. The word "salvation" is not a simple one; it has layers and layers of church use and abuse—so much so that I rarely use it. But I am taking it back today. I want salvation, and in my heart I know that you do too. Sometimes I want to be saved from myself, sometimes from others; but mostly I want the salvation of sight—to be saved from the spiritual blindness that results in so much more than simply being unable to see. Spiritual blindness confuses, making some things bright and visible when truly they mean nothing, while rendering us blind to the things and people in our lives that matter more than anything in the world.

This story from the Gospel of John is about a man who in language that gives me the willies, but language I am claiming at least for today, "got saved." He was so terribly lost; I cannot imagine any "lostness" as great as blindness. Brilliantly the narrator of John uses this physical image, blindness, to talk about the profundity of darkness and the radiance of light.

Though his entire life has been lived in darkness, this is a story of a man who came to see, a man whose absolute darkness was replaced with brilliant light. If we have ears to hear, we hear this as **our** story—the story of every spiritual searcher, who has come or more likely **is** coming to recognize light when he/she sees it.

The richness of the man's coming to see lies in its juxtaposition to the frantic choice on the part of the Pharisees to become blinder and blinder. The polemic between the choice to see and the choice to remain sightless is the great discourse of this highly symbolic narrative. Almost comically the Pharisees ask the now-sighted man over and over for more information: where is he; how did he do this; how can a man who violates the Sabbath, a sinner, be of God; who is this man and where is he from? Worn out and exasperated, finally the new seer of light says, "One thing I do know: though I was blind, now I see."

It is not surprising that this story of a man blind from birth, healed by Jesus, appears so often in the earliest of Christian art, those images found in dark catacombs so void of light. And in most cases the image is used to illustrate baptism. The seminal scholar of John's Gospel, Raymond Brown, points out that in the earliest records about how new Christians were brought into the faith, it was this chapter from John, John 9, that was read as part of the "great scrutiny," as part of their preparation for baptism. This, the message seemed to be, is the story of a man whose life was changed, spiritually changed from one way of being and not seeing to a way of sightedness that made everything new. Making the choice to follow Jesus in any age, the preparer of Christians might say, is as dramatic as a man who has never seen suddenly having the vista of life unfolded before his very eyes—everything made new.

Both this gospel and the hymn turn on the possibility of a new life—a life that but for Grace seems unthinkable. That connection returns me for a moment to John Newton's use of the word "wretch" in his ode to Grace and particularly to my aversion to it. Maybe this is how the wretch business makes sense. It is not that God thinks I am a wretch or that you are a wretch or that anyone is. But in the darkness of the night, when I am least able to see, in the darkness of doubt and despair and depression, a place of which every one of us has the occasional timeshare, I feel like a wretch and I think you do too. And it is an awful feeling but one that we perpetuate by trying to claim it as something else. What keeps us in the darkness is our holding on to it, our insistence that it is not really wretched, that it is not really wretched to live unfocused lives, to live lives devoted to things that don't matter, to live totally for ourselves—for if we don't look out for ourselves, as we are taught, who will—to follow the way we know even when it is lifeless and dull for fear of following a way that we can only imagine, and on and on.

The Pharisees were not bad people; they were keepers of the cultus, a beloved and trusted cultus, but a cultus that had grown old, rigid, and dreamless. And they were blind, oh so blind, because their fear made them unwilling to see. Jesus, this outrageous, loving upstart, a man so filled with the spirit of God that demons took flight—how dare he try to show them something new? They would not leave their adopted wretchedness behind even when being invited to a banquet of purpose and joy and newness beyond their wildest hopes and dreams.

It is a long road from Ash Wednesday to Easter, my friends; and it is not an easy one. In fact, it is one that is not bound by any season of the church but one, which represents the whole of our lives and the very heart of our faith. It is our ultimate journey, the journey from pretense to integrity, from dark despair to exquisite hope, from blindness to sight, indeed the journey from death to life.

"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."

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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