

Congratulations to the family of Plain Community Church for seventy-five years of faithful presence in this valley. I'm grateful to have walked alongside you for part of your journey.

My best memories of our time together are marked by wonderful times of laughter and celebration - Christmas Eve candles, baptisms at the river, chili feeds and VBS skits, sledding parties at New Year's and horseback rides in the summer. It was a formative time for my family and has shaped our lives forever.

I was at Plain for its fiftieth anniversary. I remember that occasions like these are a good opportunity for reflection, and a chance to reorient the church for the future, that it might be successful in its unique calling. That, of course, begs the question: How do you know when a church has been successful?

The Wenatchee Valley has a number of churches that provide a faithful witness to Christ on any given Sunday. I always felt, though, while I was with you at Plain Community Church and continuing to this day, that there was something special about PCC and the calling it has been given. It's been at its best when it has focused its energies on sharing God's love in practical ways with the community.

Seems to me, when we find ourselves getting caught up in the day-to-day of church life and we get distracted by busyness and controversy, we need to remind ourselves that there's something about a church that is frankly not of this world. We need reminding that the church is a present outpost of a coming Kingdom. We need God to pull back the curtain and show us the awe-inspiring cosmic scope of what he's about in setting a broken creation right again - and how we fit in that plan.

When a church functions as intended, it serves as a living model of the rule of Jesus in every aspect of our lives. Jesus gave us numerous stories to describe what that would look like if we took God's rule seriously. For example, in the story of the prodigal son he focused on God's extravagant love towards the undeserving, and so invited us to reflect the heart of the Father in our dealings with one another. We call that 'grace.'

Grace has a bad reputation in some circles as being weak and ineffective in the face of injustice and evil. The father in the story, they say, should have allowed the son to suffer the consequences of his poor choices, or at least accepted him begrudgingly, on probation, until he proved he was worthy of acceptance.

The gospel stands in stark contrast to that attitude, and that is why it remains a countercultural force. Do you trust that God's grace is a sufficient mark of a successful church, or do you think it needs to be supplemented with moralism or political activity? Are you convinced that grace is both powerful and transformative?

If we knew the true breadth of the quiet suffering around us behind closed doors, we would be overwhelmed. The amount of pain people carry silently is breathtaking in its scope. Let's not add to it. Instead, we must believe the gospel to be good news, and we need to communicate in compelling ways the simple message: *God made you, and you matter to God.*

We cannot afford to be stingy in our love for one another, nor our love for the people of Plain. John wrote, *(1 John 3:1) How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!* Please underscore the word "lavished" as you read that.

Similarly, Paul said, *(1 Timothy 1:14) The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly.* Leighton Ford once wrote about this: *I've stood in the North Carolina mountains and watched the heavens open and the rain just pour down, drenching the land. I've seen the floods rush down the gulleys and streambeds until they overflowed bridges and washed away roads, and I've thought, That's what Paul was saying to Timothy: 'The grace of God was like a torrent that overflowed and rushed over my soul!'*

Does the love you demonstrate toward others both within and without Plain Community Church mirror the love God has first shown you? Is it lavish? Is it abundant? Is it torrential? Is it at the heart of the reason you gather, of the plans you develop as a church?

Everyone needs a center of certainty they can build the rest of their lives around. For followers of Christ, that should be the strong, rugged, life-changing power of grace.

Bill Moyers' documentary film on the hymn "Amazing Grace" includes a scene filmed in Wembley Stadium in London. Various musical groups, mostly rock bands, had gathered together in celebration of the changes in South Africa, and for some reason the promoters scheduled an opera singer, Jessye Norman, as the closing act. The film cuts back and forth between scenes of the unruly crowd in the stadium and Jessye Norman being interviewed. For twelve hours groups like Guns 'n' Roses have blasted the crowd through banks of speakers, tilting up fans already high on booze and dope. The crowd yells for more curtain calls, and the rock groups oblige. Meanwhile, Jessye Norman sits in her dressing room discussing "Amazing Grace" with Moyers.

The hymn was written, of course, by John Newton, a coarse, cruel slave trader. He first called out to God in the midst of a storm that nearly threw him overboard. Newton came to see the light only gradually, continuing to ply his trade even after his conversion. He wrote the song "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" while waiting in an African harbor for a shipment of slaves. Later, though, he renounced his profession, became a minister, and joined William Wilberforce in the fight against slavery. John Newton never lost sight of the depths from which he had been lifted. He never lost sight of grace. When he wrote "That saved a wretch like me," he meant those words with all his heart.

In the film, Jessye Norman tells Bill Moyers that Newton may have borrowed an old tune sung by the slaves themselves, redeeming the song, just as he had been redeemed. Finally, the time comes for her to sing. A single circle of light follows Norman, a majestic African-American woman wearing a flowing African dashiki, as she strolls onstage. No backup band, no musical instruments, Just Jessye. The crowd stirs, restless. Few recognize the opera diva. A voice yells for more Guns 'n' Roses. Others take up the cry. The scene is getting ugly. Alone, a capella, Jessye Norman begins to sing, very slowly:

*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.*

A remarkable thing happens in Wembley Stadium that night. Seventy thousand raucous fans fall silent before her aria of grace.

By the time Norman reaches the second verse, *`Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved . . .*, the soprano has the crowd in her hands.

By the time she reaches the third verse, *"'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home,"* several thousand fans are singing along, digging far back in nearly lost memories for words they heard long ago.

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.*

Jessye Norman later confessed she had no idea what power descended on Wembley Stadium that night. I think I know. The world thirsts for grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it.

That's your mission. Everything else is chaff. I'll be praying for you and cheering you on as you move forward together into God's purposes for your future among the beloved people of Plain.