

**The Green Hill Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, September 14, 2025 – Table Copy**

**SILENT PREPARATION:**

Carved in wood over the door of a church in Ohio are the words “Enter at your own risk.” When we seek to experience the presence of God in Christ Jesus, it should be with the understanding that our lives may never again be the same.

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)**

**Hear our cries, O God, for we recognize our need for your mercy.  
We are like lost sheep – who have wandered from the best we know, and  
cannot find our way back. We are sometimes fearful to encounter you, yet we  
know that we cannot live without you. Find us once again in this time of  
worship, call us to that security which is found only in you, and transform us  
by your grace – to then help you in the search for others who are lost. We  
pray in the name of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

Holy and gracious Lord, who never tires in showing compassion,  
seeking the lost, and bringing back those who have strayed:  
Find us now through the reading and hearing of Holy Scripture,  
that our hearts might overflow with gratitude for your great salvation,  
and that our lives might be used by you –  
to seek those who need to be found by your love for us in Jesus the Christ.  
Amen.

**FIRST SCRIPTURE READING**

I Timothy 1:12-17

*Our first reading comes from Paul’s first letter to Timothy.  
Paul writes to express his firm commitment to Timothy – his young colleague –  
who is assigned the difficult task of organizing congregations in Ephesus.  
The rule of faith there is to be Paul’s interpretation of God’s glorious gospel,  
which God had entrusted to him....*

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me,  
because he considered me faithful and appointed me to his service,  
even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor,  
and a man of violence.

But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,  
and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me  
with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance;  
that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners –  
of whom I am the foremost.

But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost,  
Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience,  
as an example to those who would come to believe in him  
for eternal life.

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,  
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

## SECOND SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 15:1-10

*Our Gospel reading again comes from the Gospel of Luke.  
As we come to our reading Jesus – still on his way to Jerusalem –  
has just warned the crowds who were following him –  
of the costs involved in being his disciples....*

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

And the Pharisees – and the scribes – were grumbling,  
and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners, and eats with them."

So, he told them this parable:

"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep, and – losing one of them –  
does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness,  
and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?

And – when he has found it – he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

And – when he comes home –  
he calls together his friends and neighbors,  
saying to them,

'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.'

Just so – I tell you –

there will be more joy in heaven – over one sinner who repents –  
than over ninety-nine righteous persons,  
who need no repentance.

"Or what woman – having ten silver coins,  
if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp,  
sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

And – when she has found it –  
she calls together her friends and neighbors,  
saying, 'Rejoice with me,

for I have found the coin that I had lost.'

Just so – I tell you –

there is joy in the presence of the angels of God  
over one sinner, who repents."

SERMON

“Amazing Grace!”

If we were to take a survey – of favorite hymns –  
the odds are very good that “*Amazing Grace*” would make the list.

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*Amazing Grace* is an old hymn – it goes back to the 18th century.

It was written by **John Newton**,  
who was a seafarer from the time he was a little boy.

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And – by the time he was a young man –  
**Newton** had become the captain of his own ship;  
a ship that brought **African** slaves to the colonies,  
to work on the plantations.

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But – while back in **England**, between voyages–  
he went to hear **George Whitefield** preach.

And, **John Newton** became a **Christian**.

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**Newton** then *realized the evil* of his occupation, left it,  
and *became a priest* in the **Church of England**.

And – for the rest of his life –  
he served as the rector of a little church in a town called **Olney**.

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Along the way, **Newton** wrote a number of hymns –  
which were printed in a collection, called the “*Olney Hymns*.”

That collection became a classic – and “*Amazing Grace*” was part of it.

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The popularity of “*Amazing Grace*” is astounding.  
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Back in the **1960's**, **Joan Baez** sang it – during one of her concerts.

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She stood on a bare stage,  
in her bare feet,  
with the light on her,  
and her hands at her sides.

And, she held her audience captive,  
tears streaming down the faces of many people.

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For those present, it was an unforgettable moment.

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In fact, even people who are not members of churches –  
and some who do not profess faith –  
find something – about this hymn – that touches them.

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But – nevertheless –  
“*Amazing Grace*” is uncompromisingly **Christian** in its language.

And, it is distinctly evangelical in its message –  
reflecting **John Newton's** experience of “*being found.*”

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And – maybe – that is the clue to its popularity:

It summarizes the **Christian** understanding of our relationship with **God** –  
**God** has *found us*.

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Here, we should note that **God** is experienced in different ways –  
in different faith traditions.

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In some faith traditions, **God's majesty** – and **God's sovereignty** –  
are emphasized.

In others, it is **God's righteousness** that is emphasized.

In still others, **God's hiddenness** – and the mystery of **God's being** –  
are at the center.

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But, there is a distinctly **Christian** experience of **God** –  
and, that is the *sense of being found*.

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It was **Hugh Montefiore** –  
a **Jewish** biblical scholar, and an **Englishman** –  
who said that there is something in **Christianity** that is unique.

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That is – he said – most of what **Jesus** taught –  
especially the ethical teachings –  
*was taught before him, by the prophets.*

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And not only that, but some of what we believe as **Christians**  
is shared by people all over the world.

That is, there are religious teachings that are universal –  
such as what we know as “*The Golden Rule.*”

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But there is this one affirmation that is unique –  
and that is the proclamation that **God** seeks us, and finds us.

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Not surprisingly, that uniqueness is hinted at in **Judaism** –  
especially in the latter prophet, **Ezekiel** –  
where **God** is pictured as the **Shepherd**,  
who will come – personally – to save his sheep.

And **God** himself will do it – **Ezekiel** says –  
because the shepherds of the people –  
their kings, and religious leaders –  
have abandoned the sheep.

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Specifically, they have failed to do their job of shepherding the people,  
of being spiritual leaders for the people.

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And when that happens – **Ezekiel** says –  
**God** himself will come to be with us.

And **God** himself will then guide us in the way of righteousness –  
in the way that **God** would have us live.

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And so – in **Judaism** – the expectation is there – from the very beginning:  
That is, in times of crisis, **God** himself will come, and save us.

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But – in every other religion – humanity has to *try to find their way* to **God**.

In every other religion,  
**God's holiness** prevents us from getting close to **God** until we –  
ourselves –  
become holy....  
engage in aesthetic practices.....  
make pilgrimages.....  
and so on.....

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That is to say – in every other religion –  
**God** is way, way up there,  
and we are down here,  
and some of us are way, way down here.

And the job of the priests – in all those religions –  
is to mediate –  
to appease **God** through offering sacrifices –  
so that we will be acceptable to **God**.

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But in **Christianity**, the proclamation is – amazingly – just the opposite.

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The **Gospel Message** is that we *do not* have to find our way to **God** –  
because **God** has *found his way* to us.

What is unique – as **Montefiore** said –  
is that **God** seeks us, and **God** finds us.

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And so it is that the classical, prototypical, **Christian** experience is –  
as the song says –

***“I once was lost, but now am found.”***

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The **Gospels** – of course – clearly proclaim that reality.

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The **Gospel of John** picks up **Ezekiel's** theme of the good shepherd.

And – in Chapter 10 of **John's Gospel** – **Jesus** says of himself,  
*“I am the Good Shepherd.”*

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But nowhere is that **Good News** proclaimed as clearly –  
and as beautifully –  
as it is in the **15th chapter of Luke**.

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Today, we look at the two short parables –  
that precede the well-known **Parable of the Prodigal Son**.

And – while we might be inclined to view them  
as *mere warm-up acts* for the prodigal –  
they are important – and precious – in themselves.

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**Chapter 15** – then – begins with this introduction:  
*“The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling,  
saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”*

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Here, a bit of background is in order:

In **Jesus' day** – if you are serious about being religious –  
you *are not* supposed to do that!

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Before **Christianity**, it was taught that **God** is up there,  
and we are down here,  
and the gap that separates us is *sin* –  
our behavior, doing bad things.

And so – if you are serious about bridging the gap between you and **God** –  
you don't do bad things.

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And if you are super-serious – or supercilious – about being religious,  
like the scribes and the **Pharisees** were,  
then you certainly don't associate with people who did those things.

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In fact what you did –  
and this is characteristic of **Pharisees** in every age,  
and every age has its **Pharisees** –  
instead of associating with them,  
you point them out.

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That is, you make sure that everybody knows what they did.

You isolate them, and you label them.

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Even in this country –  
back in the **Puritan** days, and even in our time –  
*public humiliation* has been a way that **Pharisees** point out  
that there are sinners among us,  
and that we are different than them.

***“The scribes and the Pharisees were grumbling,  
saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”***

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So **Jesus** – then – told these three parables  
to proclaim something new – and shocking –  
to the scribes and **Pharisees**.

That is, that **God** *does not wait*  
for us to bridge the gap between us and God.

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Rather, **God** bridges it; **God** takes the initiative; **God** comes to us!

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It is –as **Jesus said** – like this:

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Which one of you, having a hundred sheep –  
if he has lost one of them –  
does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness,  
and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?

And – when he has found it – he lays in on his shoulders, rejoicing.

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And – when he comes home –  
he calls together his friends and his neighbors,  
saying to them, “**Rejoice with me,**  
**for I have found my sheep which was lost.**”

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Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven  
over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons  
who need no repentance.

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I doubt that the scribes and the **Pharisees** objected to that last sentence –  
about *rejoicing in heaven* over a sinner who repents.

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What they objected to was that the *shepherd went to the sinner* first.

The shepherd *sought out* the lost.

And, the shepherd *ate* with the sinner.

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*That* was the worst of all.

The scribes and **Pharisees** believed – as all **Jews** did in those days –  
that – when the **Messiah** comes –  
the **Messiah** is going to *eat with the righteous* in his kingdom.

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But, *this man* – this **Jesus** – eats with sinners.

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The message – however – was clear.

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And so we believe that – in **Jesus** – God has come to us.

In **Jesus** – we believe – **God** seeks after us,  
and continues to seek after us until **God** finds us.

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Indeed, it *is not* because we have repented that **God** comes to us.

Rather, it is *because* **God** comes to us  
that we find the grace that brings repentance,  
and, genuine change of life.

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The **theological term** for this is “*prevenient grace*,”  
God’s gift that precedes – that *comes before* – anything we do.

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It is the **love of God** that searches for sinners,  
makes their lost condition known to them,  
and – urges them to repent, and return to fellowship.

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To be sure – for centuries – **Christians** have debated  
the extent to which people have *free choice in responding* to this gift.

But – in any event – it is clear that **God’s action** comes first.

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It is not our search for **God** that saves us;  
we may – in fact – be running away from **God!**

But it is **God’s search for us** that *really* matters.

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And – even when it is the law’s condemnation of sin – that drives us to repent –  
it is the **love of God** that uses that threat to bring us back home.

*“Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
and grace my fears relieved.”*

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That reality is the basis of the apostle **Paul’s testimony**,  
and we have one version of it in our reading from **I Timothy**:

Paul wrote:

*“I am grateful to Christ Jesus, our Lord, who has strengthened me,  
because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service,  
even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor,  
and a man of violence....*

*“The saying is sure and worthy of all acceptance,  
that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners –  
of whom I am the foremost.”*

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The focus there – for us – *is not* that **God** saved sinners.

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Rather, the news there is that **God** *came into the world* to save sinners.

That is, **God** *did not wait* for sinners to shape up – before **God** came.

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And for **Paul** – who was a **Pharisee** – this grace was *truly* amazing!

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Paul called himself a “**Pharisee of Pharisees**” –  
which meant that he had believed  
that he could find his way to **God** by being good –  
obeying the **Law**, to the letter.

But – instead, on the road to **Damascus** –  
he found that **God** had *come to him*.

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And so it is that – ever since **Paul** –  
the message that **Christians** preach to the world  
is that **God** *has come* to us.

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You most likely remember **Maya Angelou** –  
an **American** poet, memorist, and civil rights advocate –  
perhaps best known for her series of seven autobiographies.

She was also an active member of **Glide Memorial United Methodist Church**,  
in **San Francisco**.

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**Maya** wrote that years earlier –  
when she first came to **San Francisco** as a young woman –  
*she became sophisticated*.

She said that was *what you were supposed to do* –  
when you go to **San Francisco** – you become sophisticated.

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And for that reason – she said – she became an agnostic.

She thought that the two went together.

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**Maya** said that it wasn't that she stopped believing in **God**,  
just that **God** no longer frequented the same neighborhoods –  
that she frequented.

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**Maya** was taking voice lessons at the time.

And, her teacher gave her an exercise –  
where she was to read out of some religious pamphlet.

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The reading ended with these words: ***"God loves me."***

She finished the reading, and put the pamphlet down.

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The teacher said, ***"I want you to read that last sentence again."***

So she picked it up, read it again – this time somewhat sarcastically –  
then put it down again.

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The teacher said, ***"Read it again."***

She read it again.

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Then, she described what happened.

***"After about the seventh repetition,  
I began to sense there might be some truth in this statement.***

***"That there was a possibility that God really loves me, Maya Angelou.***

***"I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all.  
I knew – if God loved me – I could do wonderful things.***

***"I could do great things.  
I could learn anything.  
I could achieve anything.***

***"For what could stand against me with God,  
since one person, any person, with God form a majority now."***

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There are a number of people who are just like that.

They think it is unbelievable that **God** would *know me*,  
that **God** would *love me*,  
that **God** would *know my name*.

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Just the grandness of it – as **Maya Angelou** says –  
that **God** would really love me.

But – as **Maya Angelou** found out – *that* is the gospel.

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She discovered that **God** *had found* her,  
and that **God** *had followed her* all the way to **San Francisco** to do so!

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**Jurgen Moltmann** – a famous **German theologian** –  
was in the **German army** during **World War II**.

He was captured by the **British**,  
and placed in a prisoner of war camp in **Scotland**.

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It was there that **God** found him –  
and it happened through two incidents.

The first was in *reading scripture*.

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The chaplain of the camp gave **Bibles** to the prisoners.

They were hoping to get cigarettes – **Moltmann** said –  
but they got **Bibles** instead.

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He read the **Bible**, and he read the **psalms**.

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And – he said –

*“I was dumbfounded.*

*The words of the psalms were the words of my own heart,*

*‘Hear my prayer O Lord, and give ear to my cry.*

*Hold not thy peace at my tears,*

*for I am a stranger with thee,*

*and a sojourner, as my fathers before me.”*”

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Then, he turned to the **New Testament**,  
and read of the passion of our **Lord**,  
*“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.”*

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He wrote, *“I knew with certainty this is someone who understands me.  
I began to understand Christ because I realized Christ understood me.  
And I began to summon up the courage to go on living.”*

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The second incident came when some **Christians** visited the prison camp.

Just as **Christians** came to **Paul** – and ministered to him in **Damascus** –  
some **Christians** came to the prison camp.

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But, the **Christians** were from **Holland**, and – **Moltmann** said –  
*“I was afraid to go see them, because I had fought in Holland.  
I was there at the battle for the Arnheim Bridge.”*

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But – the **Dutch students** said to the **German prisoners** –  
*“We are here because Christ has sent us here.  
We will tell you that – without Christ –  
we wouldn’t even be talking to you.”*

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They also told of the **Gestapo terror**,  
of their homes being destroyed,  
and of losing their **Jewish friends**.

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And – then – they said this.  
*“Christ has built a bridge from us to you,  
and we come across it to greet you.  
Now, you come across,  
and confess your guilt and seek reconciliation.”*

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Which they did.      And, they all embraced.

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And – **Moltmann** wrote –  
*“It was a richly blessed time.  
We were given what we did not deserve,  
and received the fullness of Christ,  
grace upon grace.”*

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There is another song, that captures this reality:

He paid a debt he did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay;  
I needed someone to wash my sins away.  
And now I sing a brand song, Amazing Grace  
For Jesus saved me, and washed my sins away.

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**God's grace** is *truly amazing!* There is – absolutely – *no other word* for it!  
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**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: *Amen.***  
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### **AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)**

From A Brief Statement of Faith (1983)

**We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world.**

**God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal...With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

### **CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Jesus said,

Matthew 10:8

“Freely, freely, you have received; freely, freely give.  
Go in my name, and because you believe,  
others will know that I live...”

God's grace is so amazing that there is no greater calling –  
there is no greater joy –  
than to share it!

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....