

## 7.20.2025 Trinity 5 (1 Peter 3; Luke 5)

Throughout the New Testament we find examples of people whose lives were transformed by Jesus Christ. In Luke's Gospel account, we read about a dishonest, wealthy tax collector named Zacchaeus, who was despised and considered to be a traitor, because as a tax collector, he became rich at the expense of his own people. However, after an encounter with our Lord, Zacchaeus stood and said, "*Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount,*" to which Jesus replied, "*Today salvation has come to this house...*" (Luke 19:8-9). In the book of Acts we read about the conversion of St. Paul, another example of an encounter with Christ that transformed a man who had set out to destroy the Church (Acts 8:1-3), into an Apostle and missionary who traveled throughout the Roman empire to build the Church, by preaching the Gospel and establishing Christian communities. In the Gospel text we read this morning, we see yet another transformative encounter with Christ, as St. Peter hears our Lord teach the people, witnesses a miraculous catch of fish, and falls at Jesus' feet, saying, "*Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord*" (Luke 5:8). Jesus would take that *sinful man*, the rough fisherman, and turn him into a fisher of men.

When a person comes to Christ, when we come to Christ, our "*old self,*" to use the words of St. Paul, is "*crucified with Him,*" and our lives are transformed to glorify God (Romans 6:6). Therefore, it may not surprise you to learn that the man who wrote the three hymns we're singing this morning, wasn't always the beloved writer and Anglican priest that we think of when we hear his name. In fact, before his conversion, John Newton's language, and his talent for poetry, wasn't used for such sacred purposes. It's said that on one occasion in his early days as a sailor, that he taught the rest of the crew a song he'd composed, and what the lyrics said about the captain, his character, his family, and his ship, were unprintable - like most of Newton's conversations.

There's also a story about Newton, that tells of another captain who was so appalled by Newton's constant blasphemy that when the weather turned stormy, he was convinced that he had a "Jonah" onboard, and that Newton would have to go, but like so many others, Newton's conversion to

Christianity, his encounter with the Risen Christ, brought about miraculous changes in his life. The “*old self*” was crucified, and the hymns we’re singing today are powerful evidence of that fact. Instead of blaspheming the name of our Lord, Newton would write: *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds* in a believer’s ear. His God-given gift for choice words was no longer used in a way we might expect from a sailor’s mouth, but instead, his words were those of a man who longed to glorify God, and did so through these magnificent hymns.

The thought that I would ask you to consider today comes from Newton’s example. In him we recognize the truth that we’re all given gifts by God - gifts of grace that we didn’t earn, freely given gifts of Divine love that we don’t deserve. Therefore with a thankful heart our desire should be to lift our hands and “praise God from whom all blessings flow,” to honor and worship the Giver of “*every good and perfect gift*” (James 1:17) by using these gifts in the way that He intended. This should be our desire, but this side of heaven, the enemy, “*the god of this world*” (2 Corinthians 4:4), constantly tempts us to use good gifts in evil ways.

In John Newton we see this truth manifested in his God-given gift for verse and language, a gift that he used before his conversion to mock others and to blaspheme the God of Heaven and Earth. God had given him a good gift that he chose to use for evil, and sadly, this isn’t the only gift Newton was given that he received and then used in a corrupt manner. We could also talk about the fact that John Newton was a gifted sailer, a ship’s captain. Newton lived in the 1700’s, and it’s easy to imagine just how gifted a person would have to be to lead a crew and safely captain a vessel in that day, but this good gift that God bestowed upon him was another that he used for evil. On three separate voyages Newton served as the captain of a slave ship that would carry manufactured European goods to Africa, exchange those items for enslaved people, and then transport those people to the Americas. I can’t help but wonder if Newton was thinking of those evil voyages, and the terrible fate of the people he transported on those ships like they were cattle, as he wrote words that described himself in this way, “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.”

John Newton wasn't always the beloved writer and Anglican priest that we think of when we hear his name. He was "lost" and "blind," but during a violent storm at sea in which he thought he would surely die, Newton cried out, "Lord have mercy upon us," and God began a good work in him, just like He began to work in a tax collector named Zacchaeus, saints Peter and Paul, and in every one of us. By the grace of God, John Newton went from being a foul-mouthed sailor, to the writer of *Amazing Grace* (the most sung and recorded hymn in the world), and, Newton was transformed from a man who served as the captain of slave ships, to a prominent name in the movement to end slavery. It was because of God's *Amazing Grace*, that this man began to use his God-given gifts for good rather than evil.

The Bible tells that we're all given good gifts, every one of us, and St. Peter encourages each of us to "*use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms*" (1 Peter 4:10). We're all given good gifts - physical gifts, spiritual gifts, monetary gifts, special talents and abilities that we're given by God, and we all freely choose either to use good gifts for evil, or to be faithful stewards of the gifts we've received by using them as they're intended - to love and serve and glorify God, to work for the good of our neighbor, to no longer live only for ourselves, but for the world our Savior Christ died to save.

The gifts of God are meant to be used for His glory and to benefit others, and when we consider examples such as Zacchaeus, who was once a dishonest, wealthy tax collector, but became a man who gave half his possessions to the poor and paid back four times the amount to anyone he'd cheated, or St. Paul, who set out to destroy the Church, but became the greatest Church building missionary, or St. Peter, the sinful, rough fisherman who became a fisher of men, or finally, John Newton, a foul-mouthed sailor and slave ship captain who became a beloved hymn writer, Anglican priest, and a prominent name in the movement to end slavery... When we consider these examples, we recognize that all of these men used good gifts for evil purposes until they encountered Christ. It was an encounter with the Risen Lord that transformed their lives and the way they used their God-given gifts, and as we reflect on our own lives and the gifts God has given us, pray that our lives would be continually transformed by an encounter with our Lord, the living God, to the end that we may we always be good and faithful stewards of His *Amazing*

*Grace.*