

# Why they call grace amazing

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

October 2006

*This is Bishop Paul Marshall's October column for secular newspapers, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by The Morning Call, Allentown, on the first (occasionally, the second) Saturday of every month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. More than 110 columns have been published over the past ten years.*

I can still see the veins bulging in his neck. I had suggested a break in our strenuous conversation because I was afraid of his anger and that he might have a stroke on the spot.

I also knew I wasn't getting through.

Convulsed with rage, he shouted across a very small room, convulsed with rage. "I am *not angry*." The door slammed as he stormed out into the Minneapolis winter 34 years ago.

It was a long time before I saw Bill again.

When we did reconnect I tried out some advice I had been given by an older and wiser colleague to whom I had told the story. He suggested

that the man didn't need me to correct his thinking, to help him identify his feelings, or to get through to him at all.

He suggested that Bill needed me to be patient with him as he raved because Bill was more afraid of his anger than I was.

So I sat there. As he denounced the societal changes of the 1970s, Bill used every racial slur I had heard and some that were new to me. It took two hours, but the storm passed. We were suddenly something like friends, and got on well for the couple of years left in his life.

My insightful advisor knew what is at the heart of the biblical tradition: God can stand us. If God can stand us, we may be able to stand ourselves.

The most important thing we can communicate to others is not that God loves them *in spite of* what they are doing, but that God loves them while they are doing it.

Here's the problem: we don't usually love them when they are like that. Yet, it remains true that most people can change only when they believe they are safe.

The price we pay for civilization – for evolution itself – is that we live in a constant tension. On the one hand, there are peace, productivity, and harmony. On the other, our destructive tendencies. So we, our families,

and our communities may thrive, we rein in some of our impulses.

Reining them in is one thing. Pretending they don't exist is quite another.

Bill was afraid of his own rage and kept denying its existence even as it consumed him. Change was possible only when he experienced somebody else standing it and standing him.

My colleague was very wise indeed.

The truth is that I need to be reminded of that story an awful lot. The biblical celebration that “while we were yet sinners” God loved us is in constant need of reinforcement.

In October some among us will celebrate the Protestant Reformation. Its insistence on God's grace is a reclaiming of the most basic truth of faith: God is for us.

The Christian message is that Jesus is the determinative expression of that truth. God being for us means that it is safe to be, to change, and to grow. None of that can happen until we allow ourselves to be grasped, however tentatively, by the truth that we are accepted by God precisely at our worst.

Dropping pretense and defense, excuse and rationalization, and letting

that acceptance happen and bring change is where the religious code words “repentance” and “faith” begin to have their meaning. The absolute of letting go of self-justification and denial is a hard truth to internalize – it is, as my geek friends say, counterintuitive.

It can happen when we discover that God can stand us. Then, truth goes to work. Freedom follows and even joy. It is what makes grace amazing, again and again.

*[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at [www.diobeth.org](http://www.diobeth.org).]*