



# Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter



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## Wesley's Theology of Grace Sanctifying Grace: The Grace That Perfects

*... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, ... Hebrews 12:1-2*

Did you ever have a project that just never seemed to be done? When I was growing up my Dad would work each year on a small cottage that we owned and used in the summer months. The cottage was perfectly serviceable as it was but he was always working at it, trying to make it better. I've seen people do that with an automobile. Not necessarily a classic automobile, but one that is used every day. Adding a new stereo, maybe rims on the wheels, new upholstery. And no matter how well it seems to run, they keep working to improve it. We've all known situations like that. The project that never ends is a pretty good metaphor for the work of God's grace in our lives. No matter how well we think we might be doing, God is always at work in our lives trying to make us a little better.

This is the third and final article about Wesley's Theology of God's grace. God's grace is God's unconditional love that transforms our lives. I've written about prevenient Grace, the Grace of God that seeks us out where we are. No matter how hard we may try to flee and hide from it, God's prevenient grace seeks us out. God's prevenient grace always seeks to draw us into relationship with God, to show us our need for God.

Then there is the justifying Grace of God. The grace granted humankind through Jesus Christ that frees us from our sin and allows us to start life anew in Christ, the Grace that brings on the rebirth of our lives.

In some traditions, the story of God's grace stops with justifying grace. These traditions tell people it never gets any better than that. They say if you have received justifying grace you are good to go. Set for life. They preach a once saved, always saved theology. Sort of like having your ticket punched to gain admission. Once you're in, you're in. But does a "once saved, always saved" theology fit with your experience of the world? Have you ever know someone who apparently has fallen away from God; away from life as a Christian? Is God really done with us at the rebirth, the born again experience, or does God continue to raise us in the faith?

The answer is "Yes! God continues to work in our lives." God's grace never stops working in our lives. Just as the prevenient grace of God always surrounds us; just as the justifying grace of God is always available to us, so God's sanctifying grace is always at work in our lives. We are God's unfinished weekend projects;

except that God doesn't stop when the weekend is over. God's grace never stops working in our lives, seeking to make us more faithful servants of Christ. Wesley spoke of this as sanctification; a process of making us perfect Christians. By "perfect" Wesley did not mean people incapable of error. He meant people who had the heart and mind of Christ. People who looked at the world and its people and see what Christ sees, people who love God and love neighbor with all their hearts, souls and minds. Wesley never claimed to have reached that state of perfection, but he knew some whom he thought had.

**God's sanctifying grace works in our lives as we live out our faith in the world.** If you are going to follow Christ, you don't get to **just** sit in Church and sing a few songs. If you are going to follow Christ you don't get to **just** sit in your room by yourself, or with a few close friends, and study the bible and pray. Those things are all well and good and are, in themselves, a source of God's grace in our lives. But there is more. Following Christ means living and ministering in the world. And as we minister in the world, we receive God's grace. As we reach out to bring God's Grace to others, we receive God's Grace ourselves.

The most glaring failing of the Church today is the emphasis in many congregations on preparing for our deaths or for the end of the world. Look at the bible! There is next to nothing in scripture about what happens when we die or what will happen at the end of time. But, there is page after page that talks about how we worship God by living righteously in God's world. Consider this passage from Isaiah 58. God is responding to the people's complaint that, despite their faithful worship in the temple and their fast days and wearing sack cloth to humble themselves, God is not blessing their lives. God responds with these words:

*<sup>6</sup> Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? <sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Isaiah 58:6-7 NRSV*

And, in one of the few passages where Jesus does speak of the end of time and a final judgment, these images from Isaiah are the ones he invokes. Look at Matthew 25 beginning at verse 31, a passage often called the judgment of the nations. The questions Christ asks are those of Isaiah. Did you feed the hungry and thirsty? Did you clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit with those sick and in prison? God calls us to serve God by loving and caring for others. Could it get any plainer than that? We worship God with our whole lives, by everything we do each and every day. Our worship on Sunday morning is a celebration of our daily lives of worship and ministry. Our prayer lives are a reflection on our faith lives. And as we minister to the world, God's grace is ministering to us; sanctifying us.

The writer of James has the same message. How can you say to someone who has no food and no home, "Jesus loves you. Go in peace and be warm and happy?" See James 2:13-17. What we do with our lives is not a way to earn salvation. But what we do with our lives reflects what we really believe about the nature of God. What we do speaks about the nature of our faith. And it also transforms our lives. Elsewhere in James, the writer says that every generous act of giving is from God. James 1:17. Think about that. When we give of ourselves to others, we are conveying God's grace to others. We are the channel through which God's grace flows. Just like water flowing through a channel, we are a channel for God's grace. And just like water flowing through a channel can cut the channel deeper, so being channels of God's grace can cut deeper channels for that grace into our lives.

The sanctifying grace of God continues the work of God in our lives. God's grace comes to us in many ways. We do receive God's grace as we worship. We do receive God's grace as we study the bible and as we share with one another those things that we hear in scripture. And we receive God's grace as we come together

for the Eucharist. But one of the most powerful instruments of God's sanctifying grace is ministry in the world. As we live out our faith by being instruments of God's grace, we receive that grace as well. As we come face to face with the need in the world, as we minister to the hurt and grieving, God works in our lives as well, cutting a deeper channel. Uncovering the image of God buried deep within all of us.

As United Methodists we believe that we are constantly surrounded by the grace of God and that Grace is always at work in our lives. God's grace reaches out to us when we have lost our way. God's grace gives us a new birth in Jesus Christ. We have been born again; given a new life in Christ. But the story does not end there. God is not done with us. God's grace forms us into the body of Christ and places us back into the world to serve the world. As we live out our lives as the Body of Christ, God's grace is constantly at work in our lives to draw us closer to God and to one another. As John Newton so aptly noted two centuries ago, God's grace is amazing.

## **It's God's Will**

From 1999 to 2000, as part of my theological education and training, I served as a hospital chaplain at Saint Thomas Hospital. It was a transformative experience in that I was often called to the bedside of people from many different Christian traditions and sometimes to people with no particular religious belief. It was not my role to either argue theology or proselytize, but it was also not possible to avoid discussing 'theology.' After all, theology literally means "God words" or "God talk." An atheist proclaiming that there is no God is expressing theology just as much as an evangelical speaking about the Rapture. What we believe about the nature, presence or absence of God is our theology.

A number of times I was called to the bedside of a seriously ill patient who spoke about their illness in terms of something God was doing to test them. This was usually accompanied by statements to the effect that God would put no more on them than they could handle and that there was a reason for their misfortune; some God driven purpose that was being served by their suffering. Although I disagreed with this theology I did not challenge it. These people invariably seemed to find comfort in having an explanation, however vague, for their situation. Yet, as most of you know, I do not subscribe to that theology nor, I contend, did Christ.

In the Gospel of Luke we find this exchange between a crowd of people and Jesus:

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" <sup>5</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. Luke 13:1-5 NRSV.*

Although framed as a question about the Galileans punished by Pilate, the people are seeking assurance that God will not punish them as it seems God punished the Galileans. It was a common belief, supported by some scriptures, that God blesses the faithful and punishes the wicked. Other scriptures challenge that belief noting that the good often suffer and the evil often prosper. Indeed, the entire Book of Job is a commentary on that very proposition. Jesus responds, in effect, that God is not bringing maniacs into people's lives to punish them for their sins nor dropping towers on them. But, Jesus also cautions that there are consequences for failing to live lives of justice and righteousness and calls on the people to Repent; to turn their lives toward God. See also John 9:2 et. seq.

This theology was brought to my mind this past week as one of our members shared the tragic story of the death of one of his colleagues in an accident in Louisiana. A woman, driving while impaired, caused the death of one officer and the serious injury of another. The dead officer left behind a widow and five year old son. The dead officer was also an organ donor. Those donated organs saved the lives of five other people. While we can give thanks for the lives that were saved I believe we must not fall into the trap of suggesting that this was part of God's plan for this young officer's life. If I believed for a moment that God caused the death of this man to save these five other lives I could not enter the pulpit. He died because of the thoughtless and selfish act of the impaired woman and the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I do believe that God is at work in this situation. Although God does not send murderers into our lives or run us over with cars, I do believe that the grace of God that surrounds us every moment of every day was and is at work in this terrible situation. It surrounded this officer and his family and will continue to do so, bringing them peace and healing. That grace will manifest as a tangible expression of comfort and support from the officer's colleagues and community and through the Spirit. I believe that God's grace is involved in the saving of those five people though the donated organs of the dead officer because God always seeks to turn tragedy into hope and resurrection. And, I believe that the grace of God, represented by the call from the officer's colleague to pray for the impaired driver who is responsible for this tragedy, will work to bring her healing and the possibility for redemption.

God's will for our lives is never evil. It is humankind who returns evil for evil. God's will is always for redemption, healing, hope and resurrection.

*I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. Hosea 11:8-9 NRSV.*

## **Your Forehead is Dirty**

*<sup>12</sup>...all have sinned— ...<sup>15</sup> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.  
Romans 5:12; 7:15*

I remember reading once that Billy Graham always made it a point to preach on Romans 5 whenever he held one of his crusades. At some point he would look at the crowd and pronounce, "All have sinned." He believed, quite correctly, that no one could realize the need for God in their life unless they acknowledged that they too were sinners; that they needed God. It's not the "unsaved" who need God, it's all of us.

In our society, Romans 5 is not a very popular passage. People don't like to think of themselves as sinners. Sin separates us from God and no one likes to think that they might be doing something that separates them from God. People prefer verses like John 3:16 (For God so loved the world...) or some other passage that isn't quite as honest and personal as Romans 5. But, Romans 5, and the follow on in Romans 7, points up both the depth of God's love and the reason we need God in our lives. God loves the world, us and everyone else, in spite of our sin. God wants something better for us and is prepared to help us. Christianity is not about our independence or self-sufficiency. Christianity is based on the belief that we are dependent upon the sustaining power of God to live our lives. Christianity assumes that we need God and one another to live full and productive lives. And our belief is that God reached out to us through Christ because of the sin that harms us

and those around us. We profess that Christ provides the connection with God that bridges the separation caused by our sin. We don't need Christ as a good friend; we need Christ like we need the air we breathe.

The season of Lent begins on February 10<sup>th</sup>, Ash Wednesday. The Ash Wednesday service is a liturgy that Protestants have reclaimed in recent decades, recognizing that we need the symbol of the ashes to remind ourselves of our sin and our need for God. Ideally, an Ash Wednesday service should take place first thing in the morning so that the mark of the ashes is worn all day. I've never been very successful in getting people out for a service early on a Wednesday morning. However, we will have a service at 7:00 PM on Ash Wednesday for all who wish to come. I will also be at the Church Wednesday morning by 6:30 to administer ashes to those who wish to begin that day by acknowledging their need for God in their lives.

Prayerfully consider beginning the Lenten Season by receiving the mark of ashes. Accepting the mark of the ashes is a way of reminding ourselves that we need God in our lives. You see, even if we decline to receive the ashes, our foreheads are dirty.

## **Thursday Morning Bible Study**

Our Thursday morning Bible Study meets between 10:00 and 11:30. Everyone is welcome to attend. It has been my practice to allow the group to decide what parts of the bible they wish to study. We have concluded our study of Mark and Matthew and have begun a study of Luke.

## **Prayer Ministry**

The following persons are part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

Elva Beard	Mac McAfee	Kenneth Stevens	Judy Richardson
Larry Eastwood	Rachel Newman	Patricia Stevens	Charles Wilson
Leslie Eastwood		Sam Richardson	

The members of the prayer ministry of Trinity United Methodist church covenant with one another to pray daily for:

- Those concerns on the prayer list of the Church and for healing of body and spirit for all persons listed;
- For each ministry of the church that each ministry would work to bring the Gospel to those within our community and most especially to bring the Gospel to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- For all the members of the Trinity UMC community that they be led and enabled to live as the Body of Christ;
- For our local community and all its needs, especially for those who are struggling with the burden of poverty;

- For our nation and our world that God help lead the people of the world to live in peace with God's Kingdom.

If you would like to be a part of this ministry (or if you have already spoken to me about it and were inadvertently left off the list) please let me know and I will see that you are added.

## **Up-Coming Sermons**

**February 7<sup>th</sup>: The Mountain:** Sometimes you must see things from a different perspective to understand. My texts are Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-36.

**February 14<sup>th</sup>: Satan Has a Bad Day:** Sometimes scriptures become so familiar to us that we stop thinking about them. Consider the story of the Temptation of Christ from the perspective of Satan. My texts are Romans 10:8b-13 and Luke 4:1-13.

## **Worship Leader's Schedule**

### **February 7**

Linda Robinson, **Liturgist**

Mike & Renee Fetting, **Greeters**

Stacy & Jan Bell, **Ushers**

### **February 14**

Houston Hartsock, **Liturgist**

Ken & Jan Strait, **Greeters**

Mike & Elaine Rohrig, **Ushers**

## **Announcements**

The **Nanette Crowell Companions in Christ Sunday School class** is studying, "**Jesus: Understanding His Death and Resurrection.**" This is a study of Mark 14-16 which we will continue for six weeks. This study was created by Kay and David Arthur who are well known for founding "Precept Ministries." Please consider being a part of this inspiring and interesting study. We enjoy fellowship as well as our Study. All are welcome to join us in Sunday School. Our fellowship begins at 9:45. The study begins at 10:00 AM.

## **Birthdays in February**

Donnie Hartsock, Joyce Edwards, Bert Winton, Maurice Edwards, Jeanne Rybolt, Patricia Stevens, Rodger Klein, Eric Crowell

**Happy Birthday to each of you!**