

Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived It sermon series***“The Necessity of Grace”***[Ephesians 2:8-10](#)

This is the 4th week of a 6-week sermon series called, *Revival*, which is inspired by Adam Hamilton’s book of the same title. So far, we have reviewed John Wesley’s background, the years of his higher education and teaching at Oxford University, and the period of his failed ministry in America. Today, we turn to a theological concept that permeated Wesley’s sermons. As you might have already guessed, it is *grace*. We can’t talk about Christian faith and life, especially our United Methodist heritage, without this word.

So, what is grace? Some of you, when I say grace, might think of the prayer that we say before a meal. For others, grace might bring to mind a specific person. It’s the middle name of my granddaughter, Olivia! Usually, we use grace as an adjective, using “graceful” to describe movements and manners that are smooth and elegant. Lovely as those uses of grace are, it is not how the word is being used by the Apostle Paul in today’s scripture reading. The Greek word, translated as “grace” here, is *charis*, which means an act of kindness and generosity, an expression of unconditional love.

John Wesley’s understanding of grace of God was three-fold: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. If you grew up in a Methodist Church or have been with us for some time, I am sure you have heard these terms before.

Prevenient grace is God’s grace that exists for us even before we know or recognize it, even before we accept Christ. This is God’s active presence in our lives, as well as God’s work in us - wooing us, pursuing us, desiring a relationship with us. And, this grace is available to everyone. All of us, regardless of our age, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, cultural and religious background, socioeconomic status, or physical/mental/spiritual health condition, are the recipients of grace. We are all swimming in God’s grace, whether we are aware of it or not. Because it is through prevenient grace that the world was created and is still being created. By this grace, God sustains life on earth. Like a wave relentlessly coming to shore, God never gives up on us. This aspect of grace leads us to realize our need for God. However, it is never forced upon us. This prevenient grace is God’s gift to us, one that we can either choose to accept or refuse.

I can testify to how this kind of grace of God was already active in my life even before I was aware of it. Looking back, I can see the people whom God used to call me and help me answer the call to ordained ministry. When I was only three years old, my father took me to church and made me dedicate my life to God. For him, it was an act of giving his first child, the first fruit to God. Growing up, my mother prayed for me at our family daily devotion. She said, “Lord, you gave me Ouk-Yean as my first child. Make her not the tail but the head of people.” When I came to the States, out of the blue, a clergywoman encouraged me to attend seminary. And, then, came my husband’s constant encouragement and support during the next three years of theological training. God began to work in me even before I became aware

of and accepted my call to ministry. And I am sure that if you look back upon your life, you have your own story of prevenient grace.

Justifying grace is the grace of God by which we are justified. In other words, it is God's grace that redeems and saves us from sin, and it comes to us when we simply say "yes" to God. At the very moment you say "yes" to God and accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, your sins are forgiven and your relationship with God is restored. Through the work of God in Christ, we are set free from our guilt and shame and delivered to reconciliation and new life. Like prevenient grace, justifying grace is also God's gift. We don't earn it. We don't deserve it through our good works. Today's scripture says, "by grace, you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). As with prevenient grace, we can either accept or refuse the justifying grace that God freely offers to us.

This process of God's saving work for us involves a change of heart within us, which is called conversion. The experience of conversion can be sudden or gradual. It can be as dramatic as the apostle Paul's experience of hearing Jesus talking to him and going blind by a strong light on his way to Damascus, or as quiet as Wesley's Aldersgate experience, where he felt his heart strangely warmed, finally able to trust in Christ and assured of the forgiveness of his sins. About this change of heart, the apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to the Christians in Corinth, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

However, God's saving work for us is not a one-time event in our lives. When we experience conversion and new birth within us, it is just the beginning. It marks a starting point from which we are led on a new spiritual journey. When we finally accept Christ as our Lord and Savior and we are justified, God's grace continues to work in us, helping us to grow and mature in faith, to become a better person, to lead a holy life, to live as Jesus lived. And, all this is achieved through the Holy Spirit. Wesley called this dimension of God's grace *sanctifying grace*. Like the two other forms of grace, sanctifying grace is God's gift to us, but it also requires our response.

Wesley said there are different channels by which God's grace comes to us. He called them "means of grace" which includes praying, reading the Bible and other spiritual materials, receiving Holy Communion, attending public worship, fasting and abstinence, spending time with other Christians believers in a small group, and serving in mission and ministry with others. These spiritual disciplines that Wesley required all Methodists to practice are there to help us listen to God more attentively and surrender ourselves to God more willingly. They lead us to have greater compassion for others and a greater commitment to the work of justice. They help us exhibit more fruits of the Holy Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). They lead us to become more Christ-like today than the day before.

Wesley said that we, Methodists should be intentional about the goal of sanctification through these spiritual practices, for this is how we grow into mature Christians. If we were not responding to the Holy Spirit's invitation of sanctification, Wesley thought that we could easily fall off the path of our spiritual journey and slide back to where we once were.

We recognize what Wesley was trying to guard us against, don't we? There's often a yo-yo effect in our faith journey. You come to church and feel better. While worshipping with other Christian sisters and brothers, the music lifts you up, the message moves you, and even the beauty of this house of worship fills your heart with comfort and peace. You leave, feeling a bit inspired for the week. But, back at home, it's so easy to slip back into your daily and weekly routines. Then, you come back to church the next week for another dose of spiritual experience and good feelings. And this process is repeat every week or every once in a while.

So, some of us are stuck at prevenient grace. Some of us have made it to justifying grace, but have not experienced sanctifying grace. Some of us have started the process of sanctification, but haven't gone much deeper, not maturing as a Christian believer, not yielding the fruits of the Holy Spirit which come as we are connected to God through the means of grace. In this way, we remain content to be in the infant stages of our faith journey. Where are you in this process of grace? Here is the question Methodists asked one another at small group gatherings during the early days of our movement, "How is it with your soul?"

Soon after his Aldersgate experience on May 24, 1738, John Wesley began to preach again. He was more passionate about preaching God's grace, but his sermons were not received well in the church, and a growing number of churches began to close their pulpits to him.

Then, in the spring of 1739, George Whitefield invited John to join him in his ministry at Bristol. Whitefield was one of the two Oxford students who met with John and his brother Charles in small group, called the Holy Club. After his own conversion experience, the young preacher also had been banned from preaching in churches, so he had been preaching outdoors in a poor coal-mining town called Kingswood, near Bristol. Wesley came and saw Whitefield preaching to 3,000 miners and their families. Right away, Wesley joined Whitefield in preaching outdoors. This was on April 2, 1739.

From that day, John Wesley devoted much of his remaining life until he died in 1791 to preaching mostly outdoors, traveling over 4,000 miles annually on foot, by horseback, and by carriage in his later years, offering the good news of Christ to sinners, delivering about 40,000 sermons. He went anywhere he could draw a crowd of people. He preached in city squares and jails, on hilltops and fields. Like the the Apostle Paul, Wesley was sometimes harassed and beaten. Yet, he never stopped. He kept going, offering Christ to people who were non-religious or nominally religious.

What drove him to his tireless travel and ministry? It was his conviction that God's grace is available to not some, but to all. One simple word drove the Methodist movement, the revival which spread through the UK and made its way to America. Truly, Wesley was a spiritual giant, but, he did not lead the movement that changed the world alone. Many of those who heard the message of God's grace responded to God's call to preach and teach and joined him in the growing movement.

This movement of revival that John and Charles Wesley, and many other Methodists committed their lives to, continues to happen today through the men and women who answer God's call, who respond to God's invitation. You may not be called to be a pastor, but you do not have to be a pastor to share your faith with others, to share about what God has done in your life. God is calling you to tell your family, your friends, your neighbors, anyone you know, and even strangers.

About sharing your faith with strangers, here is a story of Mr. Leland, a 93-year old member of Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Ohio. Probably, he is no longer living. In a videotaped testimony, he said, "I go to a nearby coffee shop everyday and look for an opportunity to strike a conversation with someone there. I tell the person about my faith and invite him/her to my church. If anyone says, "I don't have a car," I offer them a ride because I can still drive. Since I started this several months ago, I have brought 13 people to Christ. I know I do not have much time left. So, I have to work hard."

What a testimony! All the worship services at his church are contemporary style with loud band music. As a long-time, old member, he could have just complained about the changes his church had made. He could have stopped going to church. Instead, he was inviting other people to join him in worship. If Mr. Leland did it, we can do it, too.

Who is God calling you to share your story of faith with, this week?