Grace

Part 3 The Roots of United Methodism

Ephesians 2:4-10

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Reverend Alston Lippert

Today, I’m continuing our sermon series on the Roots of United Methodism by talking about grace. Grace is very important to United Methodists, and John Wesley, our founder, had a little different idea of grace than some people. You see, Wesley had an experience of grace one night when “his heart was strangely warmed.” That night, he experienced God’s grace is a palpable way and from that time on, he wanted people to know about God’s grace. In fact, Methodism arose to “summon people to experience the justifying and sanctifying grace of God and to encourage people to grow in the knowledge and love of God…” That’s a quote from our United Methodist *Book Of Discipline* (BOD) and it shows that grace is important to Methodists because John Wesley wanted everyone to know about and experience what he had.

The BOD defines grace as “the underserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit.” Think about that. Grace is undeserved and unmerited. That means that there’s nothing we can do to earn it, and nothing we do to lose it. It’s just there, all the time, all around us, pervading everything. After defining grace for us, the BOD goes on to say that “while the grace of God is undivided, it precedes salvation as ‘prevenient grace’ continues in ‘justifying grace’ and is brought to fruition in ‘sanctifying grace’.” It’s John Wesley’s focus on the three facets of grace that created a distinctive emphasis for living the full Chirstian life for United Methodists, and that’s what I want to talk about today.

First, is prevenient grace. Prevenient grace refers to the divine love that is all around us whether we realize and acknowledge it or not. It is God’s presence in creation. It come before we have even heard of God. It can be the prick of our conscience even before we know what sin is. It can be the grandeur of the mountains that makes us realize that there has to be something larger than ourselves at work in the universe. It’s what awakens a longing for God in us. I like to think of grace in terms of a relationship. I find it easier to wrap my head around it that way, although others have different analogies for it. In the context of relationship, prevenient grace is God wooing us—encouraging us to enter into a relationship with the Lord. In this phase, God is trying to get our attention and win our love. God is encouraging us to see that God loves us and wants to have a relationship with us. Think of it like courtship. It’s God catching our eye from across the room, coming over, learning our name, talking with us, and asking us out for coffee or dinner. God is expressing interest in forming a relationship. Sometimes we are not paying attention or are just not interested, so God keeps wooing us—continually offering us the chance to have a relationship with the Divine.

Next comes justifying grace. Justifying grace is “God reaching out to the repentant believer with acceptance and reconciliation.” At this point, we accept the offer of a relationship with the Lord. When we say “yes” to this relationship, we are justified which means that we are made right with God and our sins are forgiven. Justifying grace is what gives us the ability to step out in faith and accept God’s offer of relationship. Many people refer to our saying “yes” to God as being born again, being converted, or being saved. They are all talking about the same thing. The thing is, God gave us free will, so we don’t have to say “yes” to God. We can say “no” or just ignore God and not even answer. If we say “no,” God doesn’t storm away like a spurned suitor never to return. God will keep wooing us and continuing to offer us a relationship for our whole lives, hoping that we will one day say “yes.” However, saying “yes” to a relationship with God and being justified is not the end of the story. It’s a very important step, but it is just the first step in our life of faith.

Like any relationship, once we begin it, more needs to happen. We need to grow in relationship with each other by getting to know each other better and merging our lives. That’s where the final facet of grace comes in. This facet is called sanctifying grace which is God providing both the desire and the ability to grow in our relationship with God forever. As we grow closer to God, God’s sanctifying grace transforms us. We grow more and more like Jesus Christ. Because of the Holy Spirit living in us and helping us grow closer to God, we are able to act more like Jesus. We start to see others with God’s eyes; thus, we become able to love our neighbor and become more compassionate. The things that God finds important like justice and mercy become important to us, too. We love and help others because of the great love we have found in Jesus Christ. We seek to serve those around us not to earn God’s favor—trying to work our way to salvation--because we don’t need to, we’ve got grace. No, we want to help others because we are so thankful for the love that God has so freely given us. And the Holy Spirit living in us is what enables us to do this.

So, to bring this all back to my relationship analogy. Prevenient grace is God wooing us—getting our attention and offering to have a relationship with us. Justifying grace is the grace that enables us to say “yes” to that relationship with the Lord and begin our life of faith. Sanctifying grace is the grace that allows us to grow in relationship with God and by so doing grow more Christlike in our thoughts and actions.

Many of you may have experienced all of these forms of grace. If you have, I urge you to share your story with others. If you haven’t this all may be hard to understand, so I’ll share my story of God’s grace. I grew up in the United Methodist Church. I was confirmed. I went to church every week and did all the things that Christians are supposed to do. I checked all the boxes. The problem was I knew who God was, but I didn’t know God. I did not have a relationship with God. I did my own thing Monday through Saturday and gave God a few hours on Sunday. I was far too busy chasing a good time to pay attention to the Lord, not to mention that I thought a relationship with God might put a crimp in my lifestyle. The thing is, all that time, God didn’t give up on me. God kept wooing me with prevenient grace, trying to get my attention. That went on for decades. Finally, when I was going through my divorce, I realized I needed something other that what I could provide, and I said yes to a relationship with the Lord. It was God’s justifying grace that gave me the ability to finally open my heart and accept God into my life. Since then, that relationship with God has been a very important part of my life. In the years since my justification, I have matured in the faith and have become a better person. I can tell you that I’m not the same person I was 15 or 20 years ago. I am far more kind, loving, forgiving, and empathetic. I still have my moments, but that’s okay because sanctification is a life-long journey. We won’t be perfected in love until we meet our Maker face to face at the end of our earthly life. This whole process for the rest of my life is sanctifying grace.

Friends, when we allow God’s grace in all its facets to work in us, we become the loving, justice-oriented, compassionate people God created us to be. We fully live into the life that God gave us. I can assure your that a relationship with the Lord is wonderful and fulfilling in a way life on our own terms is not. It’s not a magic bullet that means we won’t have problems, but our relationship with the Lord will enable us to endure the problems we face with a peace that passes all understanding because we know that God is there with us. My friends, no matter where you are in your life or your faith journey, God is there with you. God is either wooing you with prevenient grace, giving you the faith to say yes to a relationship with the Lord with justifying grace, or enabling you to grow more Christlike with sanctifying grace, but God is always there. For that we can be eternally thankful! Thanks be to God!