

**July 24**

The Power to Begin - Prevenient Grace  
John 1:1-5

Today we are going to start talking about Grace. It was a major emphasis of John Wesley's, the founder of Methodism, theology. For him there were four ways we experience Grace: Prevenient, Justifying, Sanctifying and Perfecting. Now those are terms I am sure you are all well versed in! Though we may not know the terms they inform and uphold everything we do and believe as United Methodists. It is this emphasis on grace that in part makes us different from Lutherans, and Baptists and other mainline churches and also most non-denominational churches. We will be exploring these different aspects of grace over the next few weeks. Though all of them are part of the overwhelming love God gives to us, Wesley believed that as we grew in faith we would need the support and love of God in new and deepening ways to help us continue to grow and be transformed into the person God would wish us to be. So today we start with Prevenient Grace.

So what is it? Officially, "Prevenient Grace is the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses. This grace prompts our first wish to please God, our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will and our first awareness that we have sinned. God's grace awakens in us an earnest longing for deliverance from sin and death and moves us towards repentance and faith." Now that helps doesn't it!?

Remember last week when we began this series on Grace by talking about sin? I used the image of the well digger. Sin is the shovel that we use and it causes us to dig a deeper and deeper hole. We can't get out of the hole on our own. We feel stuck. We are discouraged and do not realize there is any help. Prevenient Grace is God seeing the mess we are in, going and grabbing a ladder and putting it in the hole. We may not be ready to climb that ladder just yet, the idea of changing our pattern of living might be too overwhelming, but now at least we know there is a way out. The ladder has always been there but we are now aware of it. This image of hope and possibility is what

prevenient Grace is all about. It is that tingling inside of us that makes us think about the “what ifs” of life.

Wesley understood that we are surrounded always and continually by God’s love. In our scripture we heard, “In the beginning was the word... and this word came to dwell among us.” God, from the beginning, has been with us and present to us. If we were a fish we would say the grace of God is like the water in which we swim. A fish, as far as we know, is not really aware of its environment, unless it jumps out of it. For most, water is just there. Even though it provides nourishment, oxygen and the ability to move there is no real awareness of it. The same is true with grace. Prevenient Grace is that grace of God which is active before we give conscious thought to God or our need of God.

We need to realize what great news this is. It is saying all are beloved of God. God is concerned about us and all people. God wants the best for all, whether they have ever gone to church. The initiative is always first with God, calling us into new and renewed life. No one is beyond hope. No matter how deep a well they have dug because of the sin in their life, God’s ladder still reaches to them. God keeps whispering, turn around, see another option. Quit digging deeper and start to climb. When you read stories about dramatic conversions there is always that “Aha” moment when the person suddenly becomes aware of God and no longer is happy with the status quo of their life.

This grace causes unrest in us. God doesn’t want us to be happy with the choices we have been making that lead us deeper and deeper into chaos and farther from God. So Prevenient Grace makes us uneasy. We call this our conscience, Wesley understood it as the Spirit of God within us, and it is continually reminding us of our higher better self, not letting us be comfortable with choices that are selfish and hurtful to others. We see this in people who never go to church but lead moral lives. They will tell you that they just don’t feel right doing anything else. They might rationalize why they are doing it but this is Grace at work. We will find out later that more needs to happen but it is the beginning point of faith.

The challenge is that we can always say no. We can reject those promptings of the spirit and continue digging deeper and deeper. Some people never make the choice to change, or because of the choices they made earlier are now so addicted that they really can't make true life changes. If we choose to suppress or ignore this grace we can. It will cause hardness of heart and these stirrings of God will go unheeded.

The more powerful idea is that when we are ready, when we acknowledge that God is present, and we desire to change, prevenient grace gives us the power to respond. One person said, it gives us "response-ability." When we think we could never change, never quit digging the hole we are in and turn towards the ladder to start the climb up we have to be aware that we have the ability. Grace gives us the strength.

I think of the woman in my last church. She had been a nighttime alcoholic for years. She played for the first service, was active in church and was an awesome grandmother to her kids. She was always willing to help. But when night came she would take out her bottle or two of wine and drink herself into oblivion. For years she had convinced herself that her drinking wasn't a problem. They lived on a lake and her daughter called to say that her twelve and ten year old granddaughters wanted to come and spend a month with them that following summer. She immediately said, "No, a few days is fine but not for a month." After hanging up the phone for the first time she wept about her drinking. She loved her granddaughters. Nothing would make her happier than having a month of creating great memories, but she couldn't go that long without drinking, and one drink was never enough. All of a sudden she accepted that her drinking was getting in the way of her life. She came to me first to say she needed to get help. Then she told her husband and asked for his support, and then called up her daughter to say why she had said no and to ask if they could reconsider next summer. It was January and she was going to go into treatment. If she stayed sober would they come? Her daughter agreed. She had tried on her own many times to quit drinking. She never made it. This time she told her church friends and asked them to pray with her before she went, pray for her while she was in treatment, and continue to pray for her after she got home and, even more, hold her accountable. She found that she, with God's help, had the power to respond to this change in her life that she had never been

able to accomplish on her own. A few months ago I got my yearly email from her, this time celebrating 10 years of sobriety, and pictures of her at her granddaughter's wedding.

Prevenient grace is about response-ability. It is a message of hope. It is not the light of day but the light of dawn. Yes, you still have to climb that ladder but you now know the ladder is there. You no longer have to dig any deeper that particular hole of sin. You have the power to change. God loves us so much that God surrounds us with love and grace always calling us to be the people we can be. Opening ourselves to that presence is the first step.