

August 7 Transformation - Sanctifying Grace

Romans 12:1-8

How are we doing on our journey of growing in Grace? We began by understanding our sinfulness. We have been using the image of digging a dry well. You keep digging deeper and deeper, farther from God with no results. At first it seems hopeless but God is at work, surrounding us with love. Finally we perceive this love, the ladder out of the hole we have been digging. Wesley called this perception Preventive Grace. Finally we decided that we needed to change, to repent, so we set down our shovel of sin and turned to the ladder and put our foot on the first rung. This turning Wesley called Justifying or Saving Grace. Now, today we begin the climb upwards. Wesley calls this Transforming or Sanctifying Grace.

Now I want you to think about a time you climbed a ladder, the higher the better. I recall when I was in college I worked at a cement plant. One day I was assigned the job of cleaning the top of the powdered cement tanks. A driver delivering the dry cement had not been paying attention and overfilled the tank causing the vent to open. This reduced the pressure but left several inches of the cement powder on the roof. If it were not cleaned up before it rained it would turn into a giant problem. These tanks were huge. They were at least four stories high and you accessed the top by climbing a ladder up their side. Only after you had gone twenty feet or so did you enter a cage to give you a bit of protection the rest of the way up. Yet all along you knew a misstep would be disastrous. I recall the first time I climbed that ladder. Each step was with my heart in my throat, carefully making sure my foot was firmly on the next rung of the ladder, pausing often and trying not to look down or up but just ahead, though you know I did peek at my progress and how far I had to go! The higher I climbed, the easier it became. Partly because of the cage but after a point you realized there was no use worrying about falling because you were way passed the point of no return so you might as well climb and the enclosed space on top seemed so much safer than being on the side of the tank. I learned later that day that I had an advantage over everyone in the yard below. I could see when the snack truck was a block or so away! I was able to

scramble down and be first in line. After that they knew to watch me and when I moved it was break time.

This is what transforming or sanctifying grace is all about. It is that climb up the ladder of life. We have realized we have sinned. God has given us response-ability to turn and repent and move towards the ladder leading to God and a better life. We now begin to climb. We have to do it carefully and purposefully. Failure is still an option. We can slip off the ladder, or at least move down a few rungs, but we are climbing, we are leaving the past behind. We are being transformed.

Wesley puts it this way: "God's saving work continues to nurture our growth in grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor." (from UM Book of Discipline)

Paul says it this way in Romans 12:2 "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

We are now in the process of being changed and transformed. We are no longer willing to go along with the world's view of things or as Paul says, to be conformed to this world. J.B. Phillips when he translated this passage used this image. "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold." We are now striving to live as faithful followers of Christ. We are climbing the ladder. With each rung we are farther from that particular sin's hold upon us. At some point we will climb so high that falling back is no longer an option, it has no appeal. We are in that time Paul talks about where we are being transformed because we have discerned what God's will for us is and we are trying to be good, acceptable and perfect! More about that last one next week. God's grace is helping us up the ladder, encouraging us, supporting us.

But you are probably thinking, I am so far from perfect. Let me give you one more image. Most of us have had those conversations with a doctor where we have been told we need to eat better, lose weight and get more exercise. It is a kind of mantra that exists within our health care today. So you listen to the doctor and resolve to make some healthy changes to your life style. It is day one of the new you. You eat modest

healthy portions and you go for a walk. You feel so good about what you have done. Then you get on the scale and there is no change! You still weigh the same as you did in the morning. It would be easy to get discouraged and say, "Why bother." But you keep at it. Each day you pay attention to your diet and you exercise. Yes, there are those times where you end up indulging in that hot fudge sundae or you ignore your exercise routine but for the most part you stick with your plan. A month later you stand on the scales and see that you have lost weight. You think about your exercise and realize that in the beginning that four block walk left you winded and now you are walking a mile with ease. Are you at your goal? No, but you have made progress. And we know that when you make significant lifestyle changes if you do it with a friend you have more success. Walking by yourself is a chore while having a chat with a friend is fun!

Can you begin to apply this to your life of faith and the stages of grace we have been talking about? In the beginning we heard about how God's grace surrounds all of us encouraging us to be open to God in our lives, Prevenient Grace, then we finally come to ourselves and repent and open ourselves to God, Justifying or Converting Grace. Then we begin to truly live a life of faith and God's Transforming or Sanctifying Grace makes that happen. We begin to be transformed, changed from where we are. In any given day, if we ask whether we have made any progress, we might say no. But over time we see that we are more helpful, more caring, we pray more for others, we are willing to forgive. We attend worship more frequently and we even read our Bible at home. When we look back over some time we see that we have grown in faith, that we are different. Yes, we see those times where we have failed and slipped down the ladder a rung or two, but we have not hit bottom. We stopped our actions and strove to start climbing again. We feel encouraged. We are truly walking with God. We are hearing God's voice calling us to keep going, to do better, to keep climbing. We understand we are going on to perfection, more about that next week. And just as is the case in our personal health, growing and being transformed is easier when it is done with friends and family encouraging us and supporting us.

In closing let me share a brief account of a faith journey of one of the people I have had in my congregation. She was attending college, away from home for the first time in her life. She came to the first meeting of our college group, because she had promised her mom she would, but then we did not see her again. Right after Christmas she came early to the gathering and asked to meet with me and the college minister. She had gotten her grades for the first semester. She had almost flunked out. She was on academic probation. The Friday night parties, the lack of studying had all been fun but now she realized how destructive it had been. She knew she needed to change and she needed help. She turned back to church and to God. Why she met with us is that she wanted people to hold her accountable. She was moving in with a different roommate because the first one was a party animal. She wanted us to call her if she didn't make it to college meetings. She volunteered to work in the Sunday School because then she would have to be in church on Sunday and she was going to ask a peer minister to be her study partner. Did things miraculously change? No. She was called several times to get there for college meetings. She slept in at times and missed her Sunday School assignments and her peer minister study person would text saying she didn't show. But over the course of that next semester she stabilized. Her grades came up, her partying went down and her attendance at church improved. She graduated, is now a teacher herself and has a child who she is raising in the church. She has become a mentor to others. And she will tell you she is where she is today because she put her trust in God, found the strength to change and reached out to church people who loved her enough to hold her accountable.

So we are climbing the ladder. We need to celebrate how God each day helps us to resist the forces of this world and continue to be changed and to grow. We need to understand also our role of helping others to grow as well. We do this by our example and our encouragement. There is one final way we can experience God's grace. The most misunderstood part of Wesley's theology of grace, perfecting love. Next week learn what it means to say we are going on to perfection.