

**The Necessity of Grace**  
**Rev. Matt Landry**  
**February 4, 2018**

**Scripture:** Ephesians 2:8-10 , <sup>8</sup>For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup>not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

It's good to be back up here! The air is different in the pulpit. It's been over a month since I have preached. It was Christmas Eve morning in fact. I was scheduled to preach two weeks ago and sure enough, we had an illness visit our family. In fact, it included several bugs of different types. We're ready to fumigate our home. To be honest, the thing that upset me the most two weeks ago was working so hard on the sermon that I am now calling, "The Sermon Never Preached." That sermon, which was on holiness, is now on my blog which is called "The Franciscan Methodist." I sent out the link in the weekly email on Friday if you want to take a look.

Really, though, what I often remember the most during times of illness is grace. It's hard to be sidelined, missing a lot in ministry and life in general when you're sick. It's even harder when your little one is home sick with the plague, a little bit of everything. Even so, there's this gift of God called grace. When I least expect it, when I don't even desire it, when I don't even know to ask for it, it's there.

Over the last several weeks, we have looked deeper at our rich Wesleyan Methodist heritage. What are those things that make us Methodist? Both John and Charles Wesley, the Anglican priest brothers who co-founded the Methodist movement, felt that experiencing God’s grace was at the center of Christian existence. It's a beautiful emphasis of our denomination. Grace is a fundamental experience in the Christian life; it's one that the Wesley's knew was vital.

It's also a fully biblical concept. The word for grace in the New Testament is found there 148 times. In the New Testament, grace had two meanings. The first is a quality of God’s character whereby God loves, blesses, and forgives humanity despite our sin. The second is God’s active work by the Spirit to draw us to God and to restore us to what God created us to be.

We need to affirm both understandings of grace. It is a quality of who God is. God is gracious and merciful, kind and grace filled, loving and forgiving. This is who God is as shown in and through Jesus and passed on through and affirmed by Scripture. God is a God of grace.

Grace is also the transformative movement of God in our lives. Through grace, God draws us closer to God, and when we accept this free gift of God, we find forgiveness and justification in Christ. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith,” Paul wrote to the Ephesians. It's not by works, but when we receive the gift of grace, we are compelled, pushed, and guided into service and good works, for that's why we were created in Christ Jesus.

My wife, Candace, loves the ocean. I have never seen anyone who connects with waves and the ocean like she does. She has been trying to convert me to loving the ocean, as I'm more of

a city dweller or a forest hiker before I'm a beach sitter, but she has me convinced that Florida, with its sunshine and beaches, is probably the Promised Land. Candace can sit and watch the waves move over and over again.

Then, as I talked with our Director of Youth Ministry this week, Rick shared a great metaphor for grace. He told me I could use it this morning without giving him credit, but I thought I would anyway. Rick said that grace is like a wave. It's always there and always moving. I loved that. I would add that a wave is sometimes gentle; you can barely feel it or you don't even know it's there. There are other times where you can feel it wash over you. And still other times where it pushes you and knocks you off your feet.

Candace loves to hear the ocean moving, but doesn't like to feel it, at least when it can knock you off your feet. One time, when we were at a beach near St. Pete Beach, we were walking by the ocean talking about finding God in our surroundings.

As we started to get into the water, I didn't even notice the wave that was coming straight for us and knocked me off my feet. I quickly jumped up and said, "I guess God was talking to me!"

I really think that grace is like a wave. John Wesley used some theological terms to describe grace. It's prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. Prevenient grace is that grace that goes before us. When we least expect or know that it's even there, God is still working in our lives. I love the way Rev. Adam Hamilton wrote about grace in his book *Revival*. He wrote that prevenient grace is "God's influence in our lives before we come to faith – wooing us, beckoning us, drawing us to God." It's that wave that is there even when we don't really notice it, and yet it's still moving, still flowing.

Justifying grace is the grace we receive when we receive Christ, when we are "justified" or assured in Christ. It's when the wave washes over you and you know it's there. You feel its power and you receive its refreshing peace. This takes us to sanctifying grace, which is the continuing presence of God's work in our lives after our first awareness of God. Retired United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon wrote about justifying grace, "The grace, the gifts, don't stop. God has surprises in store for us still. We may now be fully Christian, that is, fully accepted, forgiven, reconciled. But God isn't finished with us, not by a long shot." This is that wave that continues to push us forward and sometimes it knocks us over. It's God continuing to speak to us and transforming us into the image of Christ.

Too many of us can walk on the beach without ever getting into the water and experience fully the wave of grace. The gift of grace is one to be received, practiced, and lived out every single day of our lives. That means that we cultivate our gift. As we seek to grow in our faith and open ourselves to the Spirit's transforming work, we do so by using what John Wesley called the means of grace. They are ways in which we experience God's grace.

When Wesley preached a sermon titled "The Means of Grace", he shared several ways that God's grace is communicated and conveyed in our lives: prayer, Scripture reading, receiving Holy Communion along with corporate worship, fasting, and serving. Ultimately, these practices help us to cultivate the gift of grace in our lives.

Rev. Wendy Hudson-Jacoby wrote, "Grace, God acting in our lives, is truly free. However, we know that from God's side, grace is costly. The cross is a stark response of how costly grace is to God. To give ourselves to God in response to this grace costs us our lives. However, there is a greater cost — the cost of not responding, the cost of non-discipleship. When we don't respond to God's grace it costs us peace with God, the peace of God, the joy of knowing that we belong to God, and the power of God working in our lives to accomplish what we simply cannot accomplish on our own." As it is with any gift, if we receive it, then toss it aside, it loses its value. When we receive the gift of grace, we're called to respond, which is costly. As we come forward for Holy Communion this morning, I invite you to open your hand to receive this means of grace for what it is, a gift of God. We don't come with a tight fist reluctance to receive; we come forward with open hands and open hearts to receive this gift. And after we receive the gift, we are called to respond.

As I shared before, it's been a hard month or so in my household. I'm probably not the right person to be preaching on grace this morning, perhaps only by virtue of being a recipient of your grace and God's. Over the last month, I have been frustrated, angry, snippy, and downright unkind at times. Everyone in the family being sick at the same time is rough. Candace and I have a saying that helps. It's something we started sharing with each other many years ago. We say, "EGR" to one another at certain times in our day or week or month. What does that mean? You might be wondering. It simply means "Extra Grace Required."

If it feels like we're starting to get kind of angry or snippy toward each other, we just say, "EGR." If we feel like we've had enough, "Please, extra grace required."

In reality, that's what many of you have shown me over the last few weeks. From texting Steve early on Sunday morning saying, "I'm too sick to preach." EGR. From sitting out of meetings, not planning ministry for the church, or just not being there for anyone except my family. EGR. It's the same with God at certain times in our lives. There are times when we feel like we can't make it through, that we can't find our way, or that we just feel lost. In those times, EGR, extra grace required. Really though, what our Wesleyan tradition teaches us is that the extra grace we seek is already there. All we need to do is accept it as the gift it is and live into the wave that is rushing through all of our lives. There are many times I pray, "God, extra grace required." And what's amazing is that God always responds, "My beloved child, it's always there."

As I close in prayer, I would like to offer a prayer written by John Wesley himself. Let us pray:

*O God, seeing as there is in Christ Jesus an infinite fullness of all that we can want or desire, May we all receive from him, grace upon grace; grace to pardon our sins, and subdue our iniquities; to justify our persons and to sanctify our souls; and to complete that holy change, that renewal of our hearts, Which will enable us to be transformed into the blessed image in which you created us. O make us all acceptable to be partakers of the inheritance of your saints in light. Amen.*