

August 13th, 2006
THANK GOD I'M A METHODIST
"It's About Grace"
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Ephesians 2:8-10

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

We are currently in the middle of a three week sermon series that I've designed to be a teaching series. In new member classes and during other studies over the last few years I have been asked a lot of questions about being a United Methodist, and how that's different than being a Lutheran or a Presbyterian or a Catholic. The intent of these three weeks is to talk a little bit about United Methodism and what it means to be a United Methodist. My hope is that whether you've come to Ridge Church from a different denomination or whether you've grown up in a United Methodist Church, you'll learn something from these sermons and come to better appreciate what it means to be a United Methodist.

Last week I began the series by talking about our Method as Methodists – the four pronged approach to thinking through decisions in faith and life that we call the Quadrilateral. Those four things that we use to make decisions and to discern how God is at work in the world are scripture, tradition, experience, and reason – and while Scripture is to be the primary informer of faith, all four of those pieces of life should be kept in balance and weighed together as we learn and grow in the faith.

This morning we're going to talk about one of those church words that is often thrown around, and often misunderstood. It is a word that we hear frequently in prayers and songs and sermons, but a word that is hard for many to define. It is a word that is

extremely important as we talk about God and God's work in our lives and in the world, but it's a word that I'm afraid is often misunderstood, or at least taken for granted by good hearted Christians. This week we're going to talk about God's Grace.

One of the primary reasons that I think people today have such a hard time understanding the concept of Grace is that our world functions almost completely counter to the concept of Grace. In general the world works something like this – if you work hard, you'll get rewarded for your hard work. Take for instance, an example from the corporate world. Employees of the Ford Motor Company are all graded on a scale of 1-27. Clerks and Secretaries in the company are worth 1 point. The chairman of the board is worth 27 points. Everybody who is in between these two extremes is jockeying for position and rank. Once you score a 9 in the company you are granted an outside parking place. Someone at Grade 13 receives the perks of an office with a window, plants, and an intercom system. Once a person scores a 16 on the scale they get an office equipped with a private bathroom. As people move up through the system their perceived worth increases as do the level of perks.

Professional sports work in a similar way. If you complete passes, throw strikes, or make baskets you will be rewarded, if you cease doing those things well the franchise has no use for you.

And in our own everyday lives we are faced with similar systems for determining worth. The youth see it in a variety of ways – if they work hard and study hard they will get into good schools, they will be rewarded by scholarships, they will be liked more by teachers and looked up to by their peers. Much of our lives are tracked on scales: GPA, salary, win-loss records, etc. And even in unofficial ways we deal with these issues of

being ranked and scored – do we have the right clothes, the right car, the right things in the world to be good enough. We are constantly bombarded with the idea that the harder we work the more we are worth and the more we will receive. The idea of Grace, is exactly the opposite of all of this. In fact, God’s grace as it was revealed to us in Jesus Christ is quite different than many of the ways in which we live our lives today.

Dictionary.com offers the following definitions for grace, “A Favor rendered by one who need not do so; indulgence.” And “a. Divine love and protection bestowed freely on people, b. The state of being protected or sanctified by the favor of God, c. An excellence or power granted by God. Grace is God’s unconditional love and forgiveness for us as human beings. Grace is a gift, that we don’t earn and don’t have to deserve, it is offered freely by God.

Ephesians 2:8-10 reads, “⁸*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—* ⁹*not the result of works, so that no one may boast.* ¹⁰*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.* Grace is a gift offered to us, not because of who we are, or because of the things that we do to earn it. Grace, God’s unconditional love and forgiveness, is offered to us because of who God is.

John Wesley, the Anglican Priest who helped start the Methodist Movement, took conversation about Grace to an even deeper level by differentiating between three different types of Grace, or three different ways in which God’s grace was at work in the world. These three different types of Grace – Prevenient, Justifying, and Sanctifying Grace – are an important part of our United Methodist understanding of God’s work in the world. Let’s take a minute and break down each of these big words and talk about the

core of what they mean. As we do so I'll be sharing a brief description of each of the types of Grace from the United Methodist Book of Discipline's section "Doctrinal Standards and our Theological Task." It sounds really big and intimidating I know. But, the Book of Discipline is essentially the rule and guidebook for our denominational structure and the section on "Doctrinal Standards and our Theological Task" is the place to find basic descriptions of those things that we believe as United Methodists.

First of all, let's talk about the idea of Prevenient Grace. This is the grace that comes before us, or that is working in our lives before we're even able to acknowledge or realize what is going on. The theological description of this type of grace in our Book of Discipline is, "the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses." This Prevenient Grace is the spark inside of each of us that gives us a desire to do good for others or for the world. This desire comes from the Grace of God given freely to us as a gift. All people are surrounded by this grace whether or not they realize it or acknowledge it for themselves. When we baptize infants in the United Methodist tradition it is an acknowledgement and celebration of God's Prevenient Grace at work in the life of that infant.

The second type of Grace that Wesley talked about was Justifying Grace. This is the grace of forgiveness that justifies us and puts us into relationship with God when we acknowledge God's action in our lives and covenant to be in relationship with God. The process of accepting God's Justifying Grace is often called new birth or conversion. The change can be either sudden, but more often than not, it is a gradual process of growth. Justifying Grace marks a new beginning, but it is also part of an ongoing process. In our Christian journey as United Methodists this is the stage of grace that is celebrated and

marked when youth go through confirmation. They acknowledge God's work in their lives and enter into that relationship with God of their own choosing.

Finally, as United Methodists we talk about Sanctifying Grace. This is the grace that sustains us, and challenges us to continue growing after our initial conversion and our initial covenant making with God. Sanctifying Grace is the gift of God that is given through the Holy Spirit and through which "we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor." Sanctifying Grace is a lifelong Gift of God that continues to sustain us and journeys with us through all of our days. It is the grace that we as Christians experience as we grow and learn and watch others encounter God's Prevenient Grace and respond to it by engaging God's Justifying Grace.

In a nutshell, our three distinct types of grace then are this. Prevenient Grace is the Grace that is given to all human beings and that is active in our lives before we even acknowledge it. Justifying Grace is a grace experienced during a moment of conversion when a person acknowledges God's work in their lives and makes promises of their own to God. And finally, God's Sanctifying Grace is the grace that goes with us through all of our lives as we seek to continually become more like the people that God would want us to be.

Grace, is a gift that is given to us freely. I can't emphasize that enough. We don't have to earn God's love or Grace. We don't have to go to church, we don't have to be nice to other people, and we don't have to support other people in the world who are in need of help. We can be selfish, mean, cranky, and stubborn, you name it – and God still loves us. God still surrounds us with love and grace – even if we live our entire lives and never acknowledge it. God loves us just the way we are... but here's the

kicker...God doesn't want us to stay that way. God loves us just the way we are, as, at their best, parents always love their children. However those of you who are parents know that you always want the best for your children. And those of you who are children know how much parents can nag at you to change and grow. God loves us just the way we are, but God doesn't want us to stay that way. God wants us to continually grow in relationship with God and in relationship with others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was a German Lutheran Pastor and Theologian who was just coming into his own as Hitler was rising to power in the 1930's. One of Bonhoeffer's most widely read books was his 1937 work called, "The Cost of Discipleship." In this book Bonhoeffer argues against what he sees to be a huge problem in the church – cheap grace. This cheap grace in Bonhoeffer's mind is grace that is offered without requiring anything of the person who receives it. The problem in Bonhoeffer's mind was that people encountered God's grace and forgiveness and would continue living lives of sin.

Bonhoeffer's resistance to "Cheap Grace" led him to develop a concept he called "Costly Grace." In "The Cost of Discipleship" he described it in the following way. *"Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.... Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. Grace is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and to follow him...."*

For Bonhoeffer Grace was a gift offered freely to human beings, but it was one that could not be accepted without response. The gift of Grace and forgiveness offered

by God is one that by design should change us and begin to shape us into new beings. The gift of God's grace is given to us freely, but to fully grow in God's grace requires that we begin to let go of our old ways of living and respond to the Grace that has been given.

With the gift of Grace comes responsibility for action. It is the old admonition found in the Gospel of Luke, "to whom much is given, much is required." Randy Maddox, a John Wesley scholar and professor at Duke Divinity school, has written a text that addresses this reality called "Responsible Grace." In his book Maddox argues that a large part of Wesley's work was geared around preserving, "a vital tension between two truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity: without God's grace, we *cannot* be saved; while without our (grace empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God's grace *will not save*." Simply put, we cannot save ourselves, and God cannot save us without our willingness to participate in God's work.

This is the good news of Jesus Christ, that God's **Prevenient Grace** is offered freely and that when we respond to this grace our lives can be transformed by God's **Justifying Grace**. It will mean changes in our routines, it will mean stretching ourselves and seeking growth in sometimes difficult and painful ways, but it also means that God's **Sanctifying Grace** will be with us always, empowering us as we move through life.

God has given us and continues to give to us God's grace, but it is not for our own sake, it is for the sake of a world that so desperately needs healing, love, and reconciliation. In joyful response to all that God has given us we are called to offer these things to the world, to be agents of God's grace to a broken world.