

June 10 – Eph 2:4-10

Dr. Sherry Wright, Diaconal Minister

God's Grace—Free For All

You have just heard the passage on which John Wesley most often—and enthusiastically—preached. Paul says here that Jesus told us we are saved by God's free gift of grace, and that good works are the result, not the cause, of salvation. And, from day one, that was the message of Methodism's founder, John Wesley, a man who struggled mightily against those in his day who were, in his words, "too holy to be any earthly good."

Pastor Beth asked me to try to convey in—I think she said, no more than two or three hours this morning—my great love for Wesley, and his understanding of salvation.

We'll talk about three ideas: First, grace is God's **free** gift to **all** persons. Second, the grace we receive makes both **possible** and **necessary** the good works we are called to do. And third, our salvation through grace is both **personal** and **social**.

God's grace, according to Wesley, is universal; **it is present in every human being**: Methodist or Muslim or Lutheran, gay or straight, saint or criminal, rich or poor, black or white, young or old, covered with tattoos or wearing coveralls. Wesley says this universal grace is present before we have any inkling even that there is a God. It is, in fact, that ever-present grace that brings that first slight conviction that all is not as it should be in our lives, and

with it, the first wish to please God. Some call this grace "conscience," and Wesley says that still, small voice in every human being is, itself, the gift of God's grace.

Wesley said clearly that God chooses *all* humanity for renewal...to be the image of God. And God's grace seeks to awaken every human being to that possibility. That's why Wesley insisted that his followers carry the love of God to everyone. He never feared visiting murderers in prison, for he knew God's Spirit had preceded him there. "If the Spirit is not afraid of unbelief," Wesley often asked, "why should we be?" And he further insisted that his followers carry two things to the least and lost of his day—fulfillment of their material needs **and** the message of God's utter and complete love for them. We are to feed the hungry—**and remind** them that those who are at the bottom of society's ladder are at the top of God's.

Wesley says grace is also how God restores us to the relationship for which we were created. "Justification by faith" means entering into this new relationship, receiving God's love and trusting in God alone rather than our own efforts. This new birth—accomplished **by God**, remember, not through **anything we** do or say—but through God's free gift of grace, begins the process of sanctification, which will continue throughout our lives. Salvation is not just God's forgiveness, but **what** God's forgiveness **accomplishes**, therefore Wesley put little stock in sudden conversion decisions: Too often they are regarded as the conclusion...rather than the beginning. Wesley's focus wasn't on how high folks leapt when they were saved, but on which way they went after

they lit back down. New birth might be a kickoff, but there's still a game to play. That's why early Methodist preaching never ended with an altar call, but with an announcement of where and when the local Methodist society would meet to go and visit prisoners. The mission emphasis of many churches today is based solidly on this Wesleyan understanding.

For Wesley, salvation, though it begins in the life of the individual, is **cosmic** in scope. It is meant to transform **all** dimensions of human existence, both personal and social. In Wesley, the personal and the social cannot be separated. Our salvation is made possible **entirely** by the grace of God, and the good we do in response to that grace we have received is **also** made possible **entirely** by God's grace, not by any righteousness in us. It was no accident that the sermon Wesley placed first in his collection was Salvation by Faith & he placed first in that first sermon the **certainty** of God's grace: **undeserved** by any & **free for all**.

God's grace, he said, "both communicates forgiveness & makes renewal possible." God's grace **enables** us to do God's will. Now we can perform, through God, what was impossible on our own. This transformation to holy living is **entirely** the work of God. Wesley himself had a tough time with this; he tried strict adherence to full devotion to God and all kinds of exercises in piety, an effort that ended in complete failure and a consequent crisis in his own faith. Wesley finally changed from the strained effort to **make** himself acceptable to God to simply and gratefully **receiving** the love of God through Christ. Our job, then, is to quit trying to be good enough to be worthy of God's love by doing the

right stuff. We're never good enough for what God did for us. Accept God's grace and get on with it. For Wesley, good works remain important, but they flow from faith; they don't determine salvation. Here's how:

(Do the water glass illustration)

So this grace is a transforming grace. It creates **REAL** change, a new birth that makes it both **natural** and **necessary** for us to love every child of man. Our relationship to **God** is thus intimately related to our relationship to **neighbor**. Seems natural when we hear that. But how many "saved" people do you know who do not continuously and consciously love their neighbors, **all** their neighbors? That's why Wesley called the behavior of Christians the biggest barrier to spreading the Gospel. You see, new birth increases our spiritual knowledge, and that knowledge is supposed to make a difference in how we live our lives. Not only is our **status before God** changed, but our very **nature** is changed.

We are to grow in grace, being transformed, restored to our role as the image of God. For Wesley, the goal is God's creative and transforming power for **life in this world**. It seeks transformation in the **here and now**, not at some final judgment. For Wesley, Love is the goal. Faith is a means to love. Salvation is present tense, in **this** world, and requires the person's lifetime of doing the work of God. Justification, or the new birth, is a beginning, not an end. Its results include love, works, generosity, personal and social holiness. Good works are the **inevitable** fruit of saving faith. The love of God just pours over the top of the glass; there's nothing we can do to stop it. So included in Wesley's

theology of salvation are faith **and** good works. Wesley saw faith as a means to a higher end, love. Until faith is personally **lived**, according to Wesley, it is not authentic.

That is the source of my calling to—and life as—a diaconal minister. Unlike the ordained, I am not called to a ministry of order, word, and sacrament within the church, but rather consecrated to a servant ministry of love and justice in the world. You'll seldom find diaconals in the pulpit. You'll find us serving as addictions counselors, hospital or prison chaplains, social workers, teachers, and tutors.

The basin and towel which symbolize my order (**show stole**), remind me that salvation is not only reconciliation and forgiveness, but service; not only my personally experienced sense of God's reality, but my life lived out of that reality in the world. That's why Wesley believed Christianity to be a social religion, not solitary—because the renewed image of God **must** be a witness in society. We can accomplish the purpose to which God calls us **only** in a **social** context. The “necessary effect” of God's loving us is our loving our neighbors, **all** our neighbors, even our enemies.

We know by now that Wesley found it essential to combine spiritual experience with social involvement. His motto was to **go to** those who most need works of mercy, not **wait** for them to show up in church.

He was motivated by what he called "holy dissatisfaction," an anger that motivates continued reform throughout history, not just in Wesley's day. Wesley felt holy dissatisfaction about smuggling and about bribery and corruption in

politics. Those things—in case you hadn't noticed—are still with us. Wesley was committed to helping debtors, prisoners, the sick, and the poor. He established medical & educational institutions. And he was always adamantly anti-slavery.

Today, I feel holy dissatisfaction about injustice based on sexual orientation, and I have been patronizing the businesses that openly support Washington's new marriage equity law and letting them know that is why they are getting my business. Marriage equity is now the law, but discrimination and distrust and even hatred have not ended. So I must always remember—and remind those among whom I live—that grace is God's gift to all; it requires that I do works of love and justice; and my salvation is not only personal—it must be extended to the society in which I live.

A recurrent theme in Wesley's sermons is that **because God works** in the believer, that believer both **can** and **must** do good works. Faith without works, Wesley says again and again, is dead. Another of his favorite passages is in James 2: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet does not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” True faith, Wesley said, is not in the words we say, but lives in the heart and brings forth good works. True faith **cannot** be hidden; it will **always** show itself in works.

As you go out from here today, filled with God's grace, may your own holy dissatisfactions move you to love the least and the lost—indeed, to transform the world, for that is your calling as a follower of Christ. Amen.