# Week 1: Grow Deeply - What makes us Wesleyan and unique?

***Rev. Dr. Susan Gray***

Scripture: Ephesians 3:14-19 (NRSVUE)

**14**For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, **15**from whom every familyin heaven and on earth takes its name. **16**I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit **17**and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. **18**I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth **19**and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

We are beginning a new sermon series called Wesleyan Rooted and will explore what it means to interpret scripture through a Wesleyan lens. We will examine what it means to follow Jesus as a Wesleyan and explore how being a Wesleyan is unique. One of the key features for us is the understanding of how God’s grace works in our lives and the world. We hold fast to the belief that God is love, and God’s unbounded love for us transforms us and is constantly at work in our lives, restoring God’s image in us, while deepening our ability to love our neighbor. We believe that God loves us enough to meet us where we are and loves us too much to leave us there. God’s love transforms us and changes the way we live our lives. It is a life-long journey of growth. Today, we are going to explore what it means to grow deeply in God’s love and grace and be transformed into God’s own image.

We may have many “mini” transformative experiences throughout our lives as God’s Spirit works to restore God’s image within us. I was in my late 20’s when I had one such transformative experience with God.

I awoke one morning to the still small voice of God whispering to me: “*Love, Love, Love.”* I couldn’t figure out what God was trying to say, so I called my dear friend and shared my morning experience. She simply replied, “Susan, love God, love Others, love Yourself.” My heart sank. I knew that I loved God. I knew that I loved others. But I also knew —painfully—that I did not love myself. In fact, at the time, I was filled with toxic shame and a deep sense of unworthiness. I didn’t know how to *begin* to love myself.

But those three words, yet one word (a bit like the trinity of God’s own self) from God that morning (*love, love, love*) convinced me I would have to learn. To grow more deeply in my faith (which I desperately wanted to do), I had to learn how to love myself. I *needed* to learn to love myself—and God knew that before I did. Jesus tells us to love others as we love ourselves, and you can’t have one without the other. I realized my inner shame was getting in the way of my ability to love God.

So, I set out on the hard work of learning to grow in love—even love for myself. I went to counseling and worked through issues blocking my ability to love myself. I have told people that for me, counseling was a time of earning a master’s degree in myself. The more I learned about myself, the more I understood the blocks. But it was hard, hard work. God guided me and helped to remove the blocks preventing me from loving myself. While therapy helped, Jesus healed.

Loving ourselves can sometimes be the hardest love to express. Yet, when we truly understand the depth and breadth of God’s love for us, we can often experience an inner healing and transformation that allows our ability of love to grow. We change not only the way we think of ourselves, but, also, we change the way we are able to see and love ourselves. We begin to see ourselves and the world through the lens of Jesus. Once I did the hard work of learning to love myself, I became able to move through the world as an authentic follower of Christ. Through God’s Spirit I was not arrogant, nor boastful, nor proud. I was transformed through God’s love. This healing helped me to grow in love and to be able to love others from a more authentic place.

Our spiritual journey is often a movement from brokenness to wholeness. For some of us, we may love ourselves, but we may struggle to love God. We may be afraid or feel too unworthy to be loved by God. For others, we struggle to love other people. We may come from an environment that has taught us to fear others we don’t understand. We may keep people at a distance because we have been hurt and are slow to trust and open our hearts to others. We all come to the place of love with baggage from our life’s circumstances. Much of our brokenness is informed by our life experiences. When we come to know the love of God and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we open ourselves to a love that is beyond anything we could ever imagine. This love, which has always been present with us, is called prevenient grace. And when grace begins to grow in us, it changes the way we think and live. The Holy Spirit changes our lives and, in turn, changes the way we see the world around us. When we give ourselves over to God, God will continue to do this ongoing work in us through the power of the Holy Spirit, often bringing to light the spaces and places in our lives that need healing, growth, forgiveness, and transformation.

In our scripture today, we see one of the greatest stories of transforming love: the story of Paul. Paul wrote the letter to the people of Ephesus sharing his understanding of God’s transformative love. Paul, as many of us are aware, was once a persecutor of Christ and his followers. Paul, a Roman citizen and pharisee, was widely known for being one who not only sought out and persecuted those who were following Christ but killed them as well. In fact, by all accounts, Paul took great delight in performing these horrific acts of violence. Paul was on a road walking to Damascus when Jesus appeared to him, and in doing so, created a blindness in Paul’s eyes. By closing Paul’s physical eyes, something extraordinary happened in Paul’s life. It would seem that while Paul was enveloped with the unconditional love of Christ, his spiritual eyes were opened to Christ. This was Paul’s response to the overwhelming, unconditional love of Jesus that now surrounded him. As a result, Paul’s life was changed, and he was transformed by God’s love. All the hatred and desire to kill those who loved Jesus was changed into a life’s calling and deep desire to follow Jesus. With a heart full of love, Paul helped and assisted other followers too. Paul’s heart and mind were forever transformed by the love of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, and Paul spent the rest of his life committed to serving as an ambassador for Jesus. Paul went on to write many letters which are now scripture, like the one we read from today, guiding and instructing individuals and churches like Ephesus in the way of Jesus’ love. Paul didn’t just have a life-changing encounter with Jesus, go home, and call it a day. Paul had a life-changing encounter with Jesus and went out and changed the world around him. Paul made a decision every day to get up and say yes to Jesus and follow him.

For some of us, it might be nice if we could choose to accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, sit back, call it a day, and coast through our lives. But this is not how a relationship with Christ works. To follow Christ means to journey with Jesus every day. It is rising every morning and asking Jesus to guide our steps and to set our life to sacred purpose. It is choosing Jesus first before calendar, tasks at hand, and our own agendas which might even be filled with good things to do for Christ.

Our scripture today tells us when we choose to follow Christ, we have Christ dwelling richly in us, which means, we are rooted and grounded in love. This suggests love is not stagnant, and our oneness with Christ is constantly moving and at work in us to transform and change us. Just as a new seedling needs sunlight, soil, and water to grow, so too, do we need the love of God at work in us to deepen, grow, and strengthen us in faith. We move from being a seedling in the ground to a tree bearing fruit.

One of the main ways our faith grows and is strengthened is through our relationship with Christ. We can know a lot of information about Christ, but until we experience the love of Jesus through a relationship with him, our knowledge is incomplete and insufficient.

Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians that his prayer for them is “that you might be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” Clearly love is what centers and grounds us in faith. Love is what gives us strength.

Paul often referred to himself as a servant of Christ. He saw his role in serving Christ as, in part, being a servant of love. As United Methodists, practicing a Wesleyan way of grace, we see this as being ambassadors of God’s love and grace in the world as well as in our own lives. It is offering the love of God to all people no matter their political, theological, or economical position. In the words of our baptismal vows, it is to love God through serving Christ in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races. It is not up to us to choose. “All people” means all people. In my youth, I thought being a follower of Jesus just meant having a personal relationship with him. While I still believe this is important, I have come to understand (after stumbling into a United Methodist Church and learning the Wesleyan way of grace) that to have a personal relationship with Jesus is also to have a relationship with all humanity. Social holiness is just as important as personal holiness. Therefore, there is an expectation that we not only hold fast to our own personal faith, but, with God’s help, we live our life of faith in mission and ministry with the world. God’s love is for us, and it is for all the world.

Long before we are aware of God’s love in our lives, God’s love is already at work in our lives. God’s love is at work in the lives of others, too. In fact, God’s love is at work in all people everywhere. We call this prevenient grace. This is the grace of God that wakes us up to God’s love and God’s presence. For God so loved all of God’s creation that God is already at work loving us. My husband, Mike, and I, recently welcomed our first grandchild into our lives. As I was holding Grayson one day, I thought to myself, “This is how it is with God. Grayson has no clue I am his GG and I love him without condition, just as he is. In the same way, and so very much more, God holds us and loves us without condition, just as we are, and God loves us too much to leave us as we are. While Grayson has yet to grow and falter as a perfect tiny human, I have no illusions that he will not. My deepest hope is that one day he will come to know what I pray all people come to know— “You are loved. Just as you are. You don’t have to do anything to receive God’s love.” I believe when we finally grasp the depth and breadth of God’s love, it begins a transformative work in us. God’s love heals and empowers us in whatever way we need. For some, it is to learn self-love and self-care. For others, it is to offer forgiveness and reconciliation. For still others, God’s love may help to break the bond of whatever binds us, be it addiction, perfectionism, or any “ism”. God’s love helps us heal from past hurts and betrayals. It expands our capacity to forgive and love others, too. As we begin to heal and grow in love, the sweet mystery of God expands and grows within us, opening our hearts to a capacity to love others in a way we never knew.

​ I remember when this truth struck the core of my heart. It was about 25 years ago when I was reading a book on Oscar Romero’s life. In it he wrote (and I paraphrase), “How can we love a God we can’t see, if we don’t love the people of God we do see?” I realized when reading this I needed to focus my attention on loving others with intention and purpose.  This began a journey toward opening my heart to loving others beyond merely saying I love them. It was realizing that to truly love others, I needed to have skin in the game and open my life to learning more about others and engaging in acts of service to help make the world better for others. I knew in my heart I did feel love for others, but too often, it was at a distance. When we really want to love other people like Jesus, it means we must get up close and understand people who are different from ourselves. It means we need to try and feel the suffering happening in the lives of others in the world. I realized the next step in my spiritual journey was to learn to love others as God loves them. I believe I did love others prior to this, but there was a shift. I now love others as a response to God’s love for me, not out of a sense of responsibility or obligation in some legalistic sense. Again, God’s grace was growing and changing my heart. I began to understand what Mother Teresa talked about when she shared that while tending to the poor and sick in Calcutta, she felt as though she was tending to Jesus. She saw Jesus in every person.

​   As we follow Jesus daily, we grow into deeper levels of love for God and neighbor, which changes the orientation of our hearts and how we see the world. It is typically when our heart begins to expand in love for others that we are catapulted out of our own selfish desires and begin to desire goodness for others. We begin to feel the pain and suffering of others to such an extent that we can’t help but get up and try and do something to alleviate the pain and suffering they are experiencing. It is also during this stage of spiritual growth that we begin to see all of humanity through the lens of Jesus. We begin to see and hear the cries of the hungry, the poor, the needy. We are unsettled by the inequity among humanity and the closed doors that shut people out from places where they should be welcomed. For many of us, we begin to have our value systems challenged, and we may well reflect on prior teachings and re-evaluate all we thought we knew and believed. Even more, we may well realize that to grow, we must move out of our own personal comfort zones and allow the power of God to grow us in a grace that is far wider and deeper than we previously imagined . Growth really does begin at the edge of our comfort zone. This change may propel us to work for equity or justice in the places where we have voice or power. This change may move us to take up a cause in which we have a particular compassion or area of experience in which we feel we could lend a hand. God’s grace growing in us will not let us sit idle and do nothing. God’s grace and God’s love will propel us to change the world for the betterment of others.

​As United Methodists living our faith through a Wesleyan interpretation of scripture, we come to love simply because God first loved us, and at the end of the day, the sum of all religion is love. This is how I bookend our theological position. We begin and end with love, and everything in the middle is growing us to the fullness of God’s perfect love. In seminary I remember reading my first book on systematic theology. After reading over 700 pages with a theological dictionary by my side to look up a multitude of words I had never heard, I closed the book and thought to myself, “I believe this book said, `God is love.’” We can make it so much more complicated when it is really pretty simple. God is love.

​ When we are rooted and grounded in God’s love, God’s love abounds in and through and among us. God’s love opens our hearts to new ways to love and new people to love. We grow in strength to walk our faith journey despite the obstacles that come our way. In fact, many of the obstacles are seen as opportunities. Because we grow to understand God’s love for us is unconditional in nature, we want others to know God’s love is unconditional for them, too. We don’t have to do anything to earn God’s love. But when we open our hearts to receive it and truly let it settle into our bones, an amazing thing happens. God’s love spreads throughout our innermost being and changes the orientation of our lives. God’s love changes how we think, see, and feel about the world. God’s love changes how we move through the world and how we are motivated within the world. God’s love changes how we see our own value and worth and changes how we see and value others in the world. God’s love changes us in ways we could never change for ourselves.

​So often in my youth, I thought of love as a feeling or emotion. Only in my faith journey with God have I come to understand love is something much greater and sometimes much harder. Love is a life of action. Love is a choice to be made over and over again. Love is willing to do the hard things. Love is a commitment to be like Jesus and to grow every day in the ways of God. Love is stepping into places that, on our own accord, we would never step. Love is seeing others and wanting for them what we want for ourselves. Growing in faith is a life-long journey, and if we have journeyed with God for any length of time, it is my deepest hope we can look back and see how God has changed our hearts, minds, and souls throughout the years. If you are new to faith, trust that God’s love is with you and in you and will give you strength for your life. So, this week, if you do not know you are loved by God, may you receive God’s love in your life and let that soak in. If you have journeyed with God for any length of time, may you look back over your life and reflect on how God’s love has grown in you. May we examine our hearts and minds and see if we have any blocks preventing us from receiving the fullness of God’s love. Most of all, may we all seek to continue to grow deeply in God’s love and nurture the seeds of prevenient grace in others until that day when we are all rooted and grounded in God’s perfect love. Amen.

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