**The Meaning of Methodist, Pt. 1: One Who Lives in Grace**

Ephesians 2:1-10

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Hyde Park United Methodist Church

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Watch the Sermon Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOqZ2FnSP3M>

 There are over 15,000 churches in the state of Florida, the fourth largest number of churches in the nation, behind only California, Texas, and North Carolina. In Hillsborough County alone, there are over 1,000 churches, which means you likely drive by more than a handful of other churches to choose from on your way to this one. Of those 1,000, there are over forty United Methodist churches in our county alone.

 If you ask the average Christian around here to describe their religious affiliation, they will likely first tell you about what church they go to. I go to the Methodist church. I go to the Catholic church. I go to a non-denominational church and so on. But you know that an answer like that would not tell the whole story.

 There is a fluidity to how we identify with various branches of the Christian faith. My mother, for example, has been a United Methodist for most of my life. But she is also a practicing Roman Catholic, who prays her rosary every day, often multiple times a day. My father became United Methodist when he first came to this country, but was raised in the Church of Christ in the Philippines, and those roots are still strong in him. I was baptized Presbyterian, raised in a Christian school in the reformed tradition, and didn’t become United Methodist until I was in high school.

 You might tell a similar story. I know there are many couples in our congregation, who came to this church as a compromise between their faith backgrounds. One might have been Episcopalian, the other Baptist, so they found a happy medium here. I’ve heard stories like that so many times here at Hyde Park that we ought to market our denomination in that way: “The United Methodist Church: Keeping Marriages Stress-Free on Sundays since 1968.”

 This is all to say that with all the fluidity about our various religious traditions, many of which are represented among our congregation, it is good and important every once and a while to ask ourselves the question, “What is it, really, that is special about being United Methodist?” This is not to claim any kind of superiority over other denominations or Christian traditions. The truth is, you could go to any of a number of other church services in our our area and find much more similar in their beliefs and practices than differences. The same Bible is read, the same gospel truths proclaimed, many of the same songs and prayers are sung and spoken.

 But when it all comes down to it, why are you United Methodist? The question is not just “Why do you attend a United Methodist church?” The answer should be more than just about the programs, ministries, and worship services of this particular congregation. It should even be more than just because it’s the church your family has been a part of for generations. If someone were to ask you, “Why are you United Methodist, when there are so many other Christian traditions to choose from, what would you say?”

 That is what the next few weeks are about. It’s a series we are calling “The Meaning of Methodist.” And it is our hope that that each Sunday, you will gain a fuller understanding of the beauty and joy of being a follower of Jesus in the United Methodist tradition.

 When people ask me the question “What is so special about being United Methodist,” the very first thing I say is a single word, which captures what I think is the chief distinguishing feature of our tradition.

 The word is *grace.* United Methodists have a unique understanding of how the grace of God operates in our lives.

 This is not to say that United Methodists are the only Christians who believe in grace. Of course not. Every Christian tradition believes in grace. In fact, every Christian claims Ephesians 2:8-9, our scripture reading today, as one of the foundational, central tenets of the Christian faith.

 “For it is by grace you are saved, through faith.” You are not saved by your own efforts, so that we do not boast about our works. Salvation comes entirely because of what God has done, not by anything we have done. Every Christian tradition believes that.

 But if you dig a little deeper beneath that idea, there is a fascinating question that is critical to answer. And this is where the Methodist’s distinguishing understanding of grace comes from.

 When I was growing up in a reformed Christian school, I heard many times that in order for someone to be saved, they have to choose Jesus. To “accept Jesus into their hearts,” was the language I often heard. These are words and ideas that may be familiar to you as well.

 But here’s the question. If it is required that a person must choose Jesus, or accept Jesus, in order to be saved, well … those are action verbs. So what is to prevent us from concluding that that act of choosing and accepting is a *work* that is necessary for salvation? If we say it is a necessary work, then that is a direct contradiction to Ephesians 2:8-9, and the fundamental idea that God’s grace alone, and not our works, makes us saved.

But to John Wesley, the 18th century founder of Methodism, the opposite conclusion was also troubling. Because if humans have no free will at all to choose, if that choice has already been made for them by God, whether they are saved or not, then what does that say about God? Wesley concluded that a God who would condemn people to eternal damnation without giving them a chance to accept Jesus is not a God of love at all. And for Wesley, nothing was more important than the idea of a loving God.

This was the great debate in the 18th century between John Wesley, who believed in the love of God and at least some capacity for human free will, and the Calvinists who believed that God decides in advance – predestines - who is saved and who is not.

John Wesley engaged this debate publicly, through his writings, often in the form of pamphlets that he would publish and distribute for others to read. And in quintessential form, Wesley did not mince words when it came to God’s love and free will. In one pamphlet, he wrote:

*"'When Satan could no otherwise prevent [people from following Jesus], he threw Calvinism in our way.' … All the devices of Satan, for these fifty years, have done far less toward stopping this work of God, than that single doctrine. Be diligent to guard these tender minds against the predestinarian poison.* [1]

 Alright, that’s our founder. He certainly had his convictions. But for him, this was very serious. Because the character of God was on the line. To believe in a God of love, as Wesley did, it required giving human beings the opportunity to say yes to God’s love, rather than God condemning them without a choice.

 Well, the response from Calvinists were as you would expect. One of them came from George Whitfield, a fellow Methodist, in fact, who was also an adherent of Calvinism. Whitfield wrote a strong rebuttal to Wesley on Christmas Eve, 1740 (because, you know, nothing says peace and goodwill to people on Christmas than a writing fiery response in a theological debate.)

*No, dear Sir, you mistake. Infidels of all kinds are on your side of the question…I pray God that dear Mr. Wesley's sermon, as it has grieved the hearts of many of God's children, may not also strengthen the hands of many of his most avowed enemies! ... For Christ's sake be not rash! Give yourself to reading. Study the covenant of grace. Down with your carnal reasoning. I[2]*

Wow, right? If you think social media has made us divisive, imagine 18th century *pamphlet* wars!

Well, this sets the stage for Wesley’s great theological formulation that eased the divide and is now one of the true hallmarks of Methodism. Wesley found a way in the center, doing as he often did in his life, taking the best of both extremes and finding a vital third way in the center. He said that while we each have the capacity to accept or deny Jesus, that ability to choose Jesus is itself a gift from God. We do not have the ability to choose Jesus by our own merit. God has created the possibility for us to choose Jesus, a possibility that existed long before our ability to even recognize it.

That gift from God that enables us to choose Jesus is what Wesley understood as grace.

The first and, I think, greatest distinctive of United Methodism is the belief that God’s grace operates in our lives from the moment we are alive, even before we are old enough to recognize it, such that we can choose to accept Jesus for ourselves. The technical term is “prevenient” grace, meaning it “comes before” (pre-venient) our recognition of it. It is followed with justifying grace, which declares us saved, and sanctifying grace, which works throughout the rest of our lives to fashion us more in the image of Jesus. This lifelong journey through these stages of grace has been operating throughout your life, and it is a hallmark of Methodism.

And it all starts with prevenient grace.

Here’s a final illustration. As you may know, I have just returned from several weeks of study and renewal leave, and twelve of those days were spent in the West End theater district in London and Broadway in New York, where I and my two daughters saw eight theater productions. You’ll hear more about what we learned as we move forward. But here’s something I realized about live theater and its connection to God’s prevenient grace.

When you’re watching a TV show or movie or a streaming program on your screen, you are limited by what the director and the camera shows you. The director chooses what you see. You have no choice but to see the actors, setting, and action that the director’s camera wants you to see.

But live theater is a very different experience. The director has still made lots of choices in advance. Where the actors are, what the setting is, what the action will be and where. But you in the audience ultimately get to choose what to focus on. If you watch what the ensemble is doing in one corner of the stage, you may miss the central action by the leads.

The director has given you a gift. The director has put all the pieces together to reveal an unfolding story that can move and inspire you to become a part of. You didn’t create any of it. But how you engage it – if you engage it – is your choice.

Since the moment you were born, God has been assembling the cast, crew, and stage for the unfolding story of God’s love in your life. The people in your life who gave you your first glimpse of God’s love. The places and settings where you first sensed God’s love for you. The moments and experiences that drew you into some greater awareness of a love beyond yourself.

This has been the work of a great director revealing a story that you cannot create on your own. But this also has given you the chance to choose to be a part of the story, and to say yes to Jesus. This is God’s prevenient grace at work.

As we come to the communion table, we affirm together the grace of God, which loves us enough to meet us where we are, and loves us too much to leave us there. For it is by that grace we are saved, not by our works. By God’s grace alone.

Let us pray. God of grace, indeed. We thank you for the amazing way you began writing the story of your love within our hearts, long before we knew it. As we trace through our past, help us to see and appreciate in retrospect, the people and places that you have put in place to prompt us into saying yes to you. Thank you for your grace, thank you for your love. And thank you for the witness of your church. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Ephesians 2:1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

[1] <https://www.sermonaudio.com/new_details3.asp?ID=45681>

[2] <https://www.fivesolas.com/gw2jw.htm>

County Religion Statistics:

<https://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/rcms2010.asp?U=12057&T=county&Y=2010&S=Name>