

Call to Worship

Lord, we have come to worship you through word and song. Throughout history you have sent great leaders to guide us. In 1761, John Wesley wrote for us "Directions for Singing", may they inspire our song: **Number 1. Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterward learn as many as you please.**

Number 2. Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all.; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.

Prayer of Invocation

Lord, just three simple rules: a way of living that you gave through others to John Wesley in a time much like our own. He took this blueprint, fleshed it out, taught it, and practiced it. **And now it has been passed on to us. Now it is up to us to see if we will take it, teach it and practice it until it becomes our natural way of living – A way of living that will mark our life together and our lives as individual Christians. "Do no harm. Do Good. Stay in love with God." Amen.**

The Word

Luke 15: 20-24 Psalm 136:23-26

Common English Bible

From the story of the Prodigal Son: So he got up and went to his father. **"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him.**

Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.' **But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.**

God remembered us when we were humiliated— **God's faithful love lasts forever.**

God rescued us from our enemies— **God's faithful love lasts forever.**

God is the one who provides food for all living things— **God's faithful love lasts forever!**

Give thanks to the God of heaven— **God's faithful love lasts forever!**

Living the Word

John Wesley's 'Directions for Singing' may seem a little outdated to us, but then they were written in the 1700s. Even so, if we pay attention to all seven of them (more to come) and realize that they have endured for over 300 years, there is at least a seed of knowledge and understanding within them. They help describe who the Wesley's were for their time, and for ours.

Charles, John's brother wrote over 7000 hymns in his life. John also wrote hymns, but not so many. If you listen to the words they tell the story of the Methodist understanding of God, or in another word - our Theology. John did more preaching. His themes were many, but really spoke of the brokenness of humanity, with a heavy emphasis on the grace of God, unconditional love and the continued chance for redemption through the teachings of Christ.

John defined different kinds of grace and that is what I want to briefly share with you over these two weeks. He used the analogy of walking into a house: The porch is the love that God had for you before you were aware of it – Prevenient Grace. As you step over the threshold, in that moment is the moment you realize that God loves you and set Christ for you – Justifying Grace. Going into the house is how you live the rest of your life because of the knowledge of God's love – Sanctifying Grace.

There are other ways to understand grace as well – when we experience God through worship, or other people or the beauty of the north woods, those are means of knowing God's grace. When things happen that turn us from God, those are obstacles to grace. For today we will look a little deeper into Pre and Justifying

Graceey's sermons, which I find difficult to get through, but with definitions as to how we understand Pre & Justifying Grace.

First God offers a relationship – In the scriptures we see God offering a covenant – here is the history of Covenant:

Noah – Gen. 9:8-13 God gave the Rainbow Covenant to all living things/no more floods to destroy all flesh

Abraham – Gen. 12:1-3 God said: *I will make of you a great nation and bless you*

Moses – Exodus. 19:3-6 God shared - *I have brought you out of Egypt/ Obey my voice and be my treasured possession.*

David – 2 Sam. 23:5 *An everlasting Covenant ordered in all things and secure*

New Covenant – Jeremiah 31: 31-34 *I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts, I will be their God and they will be my people.*

Jesus – Matt. 26:26-29 *He blessed the bread, broke it and shared it saying this is my body. He then took the cup, gave thanks for it and said "Drink, this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins"*

In the Psalms, the ancient Biblical hymns, chapter 136 has a refrain we shared earlier: **God's faithful love lasts forever!** The relationship that is offered is a forever love.

The prophet Isaiah, shares God's divine initiative and pursuit from our very beginning in chapter 49 - *"Listen to me. O coastlands, pay attention you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me."*

The definition of Prevenient Grace is God's unconditional love for us. Through Jesus – John 1:16 "From [Christ's] fullness we have received, grace upon grace." It is a Free gift – Rom. 3:24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, and it is enough for us – 2Cor. 12:9 My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.

God's activities in 'wooing us' prevents us from moving so far from God that we can't respond to God's offer.

We are free to respond and to trust: Jesus came to seek All – Luke 19:10 *"For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the weak and the lost."*

God's promise – John 3:16 *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

Faith is a free response – Galatians 5:1-6 *"For freedom Christ has set us free."*

The grace at work in us between conception and conversion is called Prevenient grace.

How We Experience God's Prevenient Grace: I Grew up in River Falls, WI, and lived there 25 years. Then I married and lived in Hayward for 20 years. The national average today is that people move every 2 years.

20 years ago, I had just become very close to another mother of little boys, named Ardis. Shared problems with our boys, shared a love of handicrafts and even did some craft shows together. Went to the same church, this church and attended the same Bible Study. Then she moved two states away. I felt so alone.

Only a couple of months later – another potential friend, Sue Moeller, with a son the same age as one of mine, moved to town and joined our church. At first I was afraid to get close. I didn't want to experience the pains of watching friends come and go. But we got close anyway – I have known such joy...being in relationship with others.

In 1998, as I cried through the leaving of another friend, cried for hours. I cried myself to sleep. Just the moment before sleep I saw Christ with tears rolling down his face, nails in his hands and a voice said to me, "don't you think I feel your pain?" When I awoke after a peaceful sleep, I had forgotten what I had experienced until hours later when I was saying final goodbyes to that friend. It suddenly came back to me and I knew it would be OK.

To experience REAL Love, REAL Joy takes REAL Risk, REAL Pain, REAL Surrender, and then we can receive REAL Comfort. From a REAL GOD. It was only a short time later that my dear friend, Sue, died suddenly of an aneurysm - this caused even even worse pain to my heart. But what I know now is that God has a net out to catch me even before I fall.

John 16:13-15 says that the Holy Spirit speaks to us: hearts and minds. Not forcing, but courting us: "*The Holy Spirit working for our repentance in brokenness and helping us receive the free gift of God, eternal life in Jesus Christ.*" – Romans 6:23 God's influence continues nudging us toward our acceptance of a relationship. The Holy Spirit, like the wind, keeps blowing into our weakest points: God's grace fully flows to our point of need.

John Wesley was a unique character... He wrote many sermons, which he had published as well as other books and pamphlets. I have a great collection if anyone wants to explore more. He covered a broad range of topics, all of which were related to God in some way. Though not trained as a physician, he put together a book to promote physical healing entitled "Primitive Physick" In it he suggests cures for 289 issues: Let me read a few for you, which might be useful in your lives...(read book).

I was also a unique character growing up. I was raised in a loving, Christian home. But because I was unique, Mom said "Can't you just be like everyone else?" So I tried to conform... At age 18, I was sent off into the world for my Freshman year in college – I was now free to be whomever I wanted to be! It was a lot of freedom – a chance to experience things I had never done before. I was raised a very naïve 'good girl.'

I thought I had Joy and Peace and Love while I was making some poor choices...but not after! But at that point I justified my actions: I thought I needed to do things to be a part of the group...I was now conforming, but it was to what others decided for me. I began to have low self worth – just as low as the prodigal son. God watched over me; kept myself, and others whole and alive; until I could come to know true Joy, Peace and love without the poor choices. I could return as a loved child of God.

God offers us a relationship of unconditional love and grace. In the beginning God created the world, saw that it was good (Genesis 1-2). Poor choices separate us from God and diminish our Spiritual lives (Genesis 3), just as in the case of the Prodigal Son from the loving father (Luke 15:11-17), God's gift of love and grace are greater than all our wrong choices (Luke 15:20-24).

Because God created us in God's image and designed us for a living relationship with God, nothing else can satisfy our soul – not money, alcohol, drugs or power. The central theme of the Bible is the story of God calling us back into the relationship for which we were created. Jesus called people to accept the relationship God offers them (Matthew 11:28; Luke 19:1-10). God offers us a personal relationship of self-giving love, not a system of rules and regulations. (I John 4:7-12)

Our acceptance of the relationship: Justifying Grace is at work in the moment we say "Yes" to the relationship God offers us in Christ. Our acceptance changes everything. In the story of the prodigal son, justifying grace is evident in the prodigal's turning away from his misery and returning home. Likewise, we are restored to an eternal relationship with the One who knows and loves us better than we know and love ourselves (Luke 15:20-24)

Using the anthology of courtship, when we accept God's grace, we say 'yes' to the One who has been wooing and pursuing us, desiring a relationship with us. As in courtship, saying yes changes the nature of the relationship completely. Love has won, and 'yes' marks the beginning point of a lifelong commitment to marriage and a shared life. The commitment to this human relationship resembles our eternal commitment to Christ and the church.

Responding to grace is an act of faith. We cannot do anything to merit a relationship with God. **(Repeat)** (Romans 3:21-28; Ephesians 2:8-9) Salvation is instantaneous and continuous. It is correct to say: I was saved

by grace, I am saved by grace, and I will be saved by grace. In scripture, this spiritual experience of Justifying Grace also known as: salvation, healing, conversion, having one's sins forgiven, and being born again.

Looking back I don't know my moment of conversion, but I know the story: I was a farm girl, who was able to get away from the farm for one week each summer to go to church camp. As the oldest child on a dairy farm, my dad decided one summer that I was ready to take a calf for 4-H and to the County Fair. I wasn't excited about the prospect and named the calf Petunia.

During the summer I spent some time with her, not nearly enough, and two weeks before the fair, I left for a week of camp. When I returned I went to walk her and she got away from me. She headed for the open fields and I ran to get my brother, my uncle and my dad. We chased her for an hour and I was mad, but then she ran into the barbed wire fence and I started to cry.

Through my tears I began to sing Kum Ba Yah – Lord, come by here. We eventually caught her, put salve on her wounds and a week later I took her to the fair where she stepped on my toes and I got a last place ribbon. I was done with her...

The point of this story is that at the age of 24 it clicked for me that on that day in the field with Petunia, I finally surrendered and said 'yes' to God. My conversion story is that I Justified in my faith while chasing a calf through the fields. It is about God's activity and our response. Justifying Grace is a double acceptance: God says "Yes" to us in creation and again in the cross, Christ died 'while we were yet sinners', thus proving God's unconditional love and acceptance of us. (Romans 5:6-11) We say "Yes" to the relationship God offers us through Christ.

Once upon a time, I tried to justify my poor behaviors. Now I am free through my faith to be justified by God's grace, and grace alone. I can now just be 'just me' – who God created me to be – without the crutch of conforming to the whims of others. I don't have to depend on anything else, or on just myself alone to get it all right anymore. I try to be totally dependent on Christ and then I can know true joy, peace and love.