

**"What makes a Methodist? Grace"**

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**Romans 3:21-26**

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**Medford UMC;NJ**

Are your failures haunting you? If so, I'd say you're in good company. Our entire being seems to be based on knowing and succeeding and being better and stronger and smarter than others. Anxieties are at an all-time high over making any sort of mistake and everything we do from our jobs to just regularly buying a coffee from the same shop is all a rewards system. "I did this, so I deserve this. I bought 5 coffees so I now get a free one" Over-extended work-weeks are brag-able, and with social media, we can manipulate our stories, our narratives to drive down deeper our undealt with insecurities over not being good enough.

It makes me think of a story a preacher once shared about a moment between him and his son. He writes:

"My six-year-old son used one of those super adhesive glues on a model airplane he was building. In less than three minutes, his right index finger was bonded securely to the shiny blue wing of his DC-10. He tried to free it. He tugged it, pulled it, like a cat with tape stuck to its paw he waved it frantically; but he couldn't budge his finger free.

"Finally, he came to me for help.

"As tears began to well-up in his eyes - out of frustration and embarrassment and stupidity - I worked hard not to laugh. And as I looked at him, I suddenly remembered the scene when I visited a new family in our neighborhood, a few nights earlier:

"The father of the family introduced his children: 'This is Pete. He's the clumsy one of the lot.' 'That's Kathy coming in with mud on her shoes. She's the sloppy one.' 'And as always, Mike's last. He'll be late for his own funeral, I promise you.'

"This dad did a thorough job of 'gluing' his children to their faults and mistakes. I didn't want that to happen to here. So, as my son and I talked, I, unbeknownst to him, reached over and stuck my hand into my computer printer which was in the process of printing my Sunday sermon.

"As tears began to flow from my son's eyes, he finally held up his hand glued to the airplane wing and I reached out to take hold of it with the hand I had been concealing - which was now covered with black ink and randomly printed words. My son looked at my hand in amazement. Seeing his shock, I replied nonchalantly, 'You know... only truly great people put their whole selves into whatever they're doing.'

"My son looked at me and smiled. I got some solvent for the two of us.

"Oh, and by the way: Today my son is all grown up... and he designs airplanes for a living."

God's unwillingness to glue us to our wrongs. That's where we begin our new series this morning.

They say that preacher's only actually have one sermon message, and that if you dig through years - decades worth of their Sunday Morning material, and peel back enough layers, it doesn't matter the topic because the takeaway remains the same no matter what.

Here's mine: God loves you, and there's just absolutely nothing that you can do about it.

It's very Methodist, actually very Reformed in its message, more on that in a moment, but here's what's interesting, with that statement, I just divided the room because my guess is that when you hear that, one of two knee-jerk reactions bubbles up inside you:

1) Well duh! Of course! I thought that's why we're here!

And,

2) Yeah right! I've been around the block and THIS isn't love. If either of those sounds like where you lean, good news! From there, the match is struck for a theological movement birthed in retrieving these slivers of God's grace in the darkest, most painful, most hopeless areas of life which then became one of the world's largest Protestant denominations, with 12 million United Methodists and 80 million total Methodist affiliated members across the planet Earth.

When developing this series on "What makes a Methodist", I struggled a bit as I mentioned in Friday's newsletter about how to consolidate an almost 300-year-old faith movement into 5 topics. But no matter what themes I threw around, where to begin was obvious and unwavering: grace. There is no Methodist movement without grace. And like any good Methodist preacher, this is actually my third sermon this year alone on grace, and unlikely my last. Grace lives at the very core of our Christian faith, its basically the whole deal, it may have even been one of the first Christian concepts that most people have been

taught YET it is also the same concept that people still struggle with their whole lives, till their dying day. Grace, the beating heart of Methodism.

Our text today comes from Paul's letter to the Romans, the longest of his letters, written in Corinth roughly 25 years after the death and resurrection of Christ. And the reasoning behind my choosing this text is that it was when hearing about specifically this book of the bible, Methodism's founder, John Wesley, had his famous, "heart strangely warmed" moment which is considered the birthdate of Methodism - Aldersgate Day, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1738.

Let me get us to that moment, a little Methodist history to start us off (I'll try to be brief, but I make no promises): John was a priest in the Church of England long before he had any sort of conversion experience. This isn't to say he didn't believe in a God, but it is to say that he didn't get what the existence of God had really anything to do with him. God loves us, great, nice, but it seemed hollow, almost irrelevant. "What does that mean, God loves us?"

And here sits where many struggle with grace: it's sounds very nice but what does it have to do with me? John's father and brothers were priests, he went into the family business really, I can relate, but he constantly found himself at odds with his colleagues over what the actual point of faith and worship and God meant for the day-to-day person. And after a failure of a mission attempt in Georgia, along with a broken heart, he and his brother, Charles, returned to England, very much with their tails between their legs. Something was missing. They found themselves with that Holy Envy I mentioned a few weeks ago

towards the calm, unshakeable faith of others, particularly the Moravians, a reformed, German denomination.

But it wasn't until Charles unexpectedly fell ill, so ill that he was fearing his death, that on Pentecost Sunday, Charles basically had a coming to terms moment where he in his young age had to ask, "Am I okay with dying, with this really being it? Can I face God?" Illness and death has a way of doing that to us, finally allowing some clarity into exactly who we are and who we have been and what we actually believe or don't believe.

Charles then had a moment of what can only be described as a conversion where he finally just sort of accepted that the answer is probably no, that he hasn't done enough, hasn't always made God happy no matter how hard he tried in his ministry, but that he would get a pass anyway. And the freedom in that just completely changed his outlook on God and faith and service. And he wanted that for John too, John was just so miserable at this point. So John did what we all would do on a Wednesday night, he (very reluctantly) went to Aldersgate Street where someone was reading aloud Martin Luther's preface on his commentary on the Book of Romans. Very exciting stuff, BUT what was Martin Luther, the Priest who began the protestant movement's whole point - The church needs to stop telling people to try to earn something from God that they already have!

And we can see how the Romans text from today just screams that at us: "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus."

And then later in Romans 11: "But if it is by grace, it isn't by what's done anymore. If it were, God's grace wouldn't be grace."

Fear tactics create timid, undaring faith, but grace - creates empowered faith.

I once heard it said that Christianity is not about loving Jesus, Christianity is about loving Judas.

The birthday of Methodism, the genesis of its theological development is this: I've messed up, I've failed, but I wasn't created to just wallow in my failures until I die. I was created out of love, to be loved, and to share love, and that means accepting the fact that God's a whole lot quicker to forgive than we are.

In "The Cost of Discipleship", Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: "By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are."

You can see how with this theological revelation alone, the Wesley's really taking in the perspective that changed the course of Christianity forever just 2 centuries prior, it changes everything. Seeing God's grace as something that's already beat you to the punch, it changes our reasoning to try to not judge people, it changes our understanding of what forgiveness even is, it changes why we even bother getting up in the morning and doing anything in this broken, painful world where we ourselves have offered grace or love or kindness and have been met with hate and selfishness and rudeness. That doesn't mean we don't try to have grace again, it sure doesn't stop God.

If we can truly hook onto, not just hear but believe that God the Creator offers grace freely, then everything we're doing changes. We can finally move on from our worst moments and actually do good.

So we have our Romans texts about God's free grace, so I'll throw in what's often used to counter it. James chapter 2: "faith without works is dead" is the premise of the text, and when we pair this text with Romans, I'd argue that they don't have to conflict one another. James' basic point is that if you actually had faith in God, then you would do good works - AND HE'S RIGHT - but I'd caution the order here:

Romans is saying that we have been freely offered grace by God and that when we recognize that grace we can build faith. Then James says that now because you have recognized that grace and have faith in it, you can't help but go share it with others. They're 2 parts of the same timeline. Gods gives grace > we build faith > faith inspires us to do good.

Irish poet and playwright, Oscar Wilde once said, "Every day is another chance to get it wrong." We're going to get it wrong, A LOT, but God's grace has already given us the okay to try again. It reminds me of a sentiment an author once wrote:

"You've failed many times, although you may not remember. You fell down the first time you tried to walk. You almost drowned the first time you tried to swim, didn't you? Did you hit the ball the first time you swung the bat? Life consists of failure; but somewhere along the line we come to convince ourselves that failure is terminal. But the God of the cross and the empty tomb wants us to remember always that failure is

not the end. To, instead, get back up and try again... and again!

"All nature shouts of this beginning-again-God who can make all our failures regenerative, the One who is risings again, who never tires of fresh starts, second chances, nativities, renaissances in persons or in culture. God is a God of starting over, of genesis and re-genesis. Don't put a period where God has only put a comma."

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As we spend the next few weeks learning about different defining traits of this wild tradition we call Methodism, keep pulling all of it back to a grace from God that believes in human goodness despite everything.