

Happy Labor Day Weekend! Everyone tries to do as little labor as possible for these three days. Many of us see this weekend as a celebration of the end of summer and one more chance to relax before the busyness of Fall sets in. I'm glad that you are here to tender your soul in worship before you do anything else. Today we conclude our sermon series, "A Vocabulary of Faith" with "Sanctifying Grace."

The last two Sundays, we talked about prevenient grace and justifying grace. **Prevenient grace** is the first stage of God's grace where God is actively present in our lives even before we realize it. This is our courtship period with God when we can check him out without any serious commitment. Prevenient grace continues until we have an "A-ha" moment, when we realize that God loves us unconditionally and we accept the relationship God offers. This moment is called "**Justifying grace**" and it changes the relationship between ourselves and God—no more dating. We are now committed to God and to becoming disciples of Jesus Christ. In this stage, we are like "newlyweds" defining our lives together.

With justifying grace, we start the journey of growth and maturity in our relationship with God. The grace we experience in this journey is "**Sanctifying Grace**." John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, sometimes called this "**Perfecting Grace**," but he did not mean that we become perfect. Rather, his understanding was that we become so full of God's love that our intentions are pure in our love of God and humanity. We partake in the divine nature.

When we receive the grace of God, life vindicates itself by being God's workman (Eph 2: 8-10). Just as we need continuous work in our own married life, we must work actively on our relationship with God. This is called the process of deepening discipleship, where we experience sanctifying grace.

United Methodists deepen discipleship in two ways: **works of piety** and **works of mercy**. John Wesley called this "the means of grace." The means of grace are ways God works invisibly, strengthening and confirming our faith. The works of piety are the means of grace that contribute to the development of "Christ-like" character—the shaping and strengthening of the inner life of the disciples. It is the grace working on personal piety through both individual and communal practices. We read, mediate, and study the scriptures. We also pray, fast, attend worship, and share our faith with others.

The works of mercy are expressions of our love for God and for neighbors as well as a way of practicing and even feeding our love. As a means of grace, the works of mercy are a channel of God's grace to us as we offer ourselves in caring for others. It is the grace working on social holiness. We do no harm, do good, visit the sick, feed the hungry, and give generously to the needs of others. We also seek justice, end oppression and discrimination, and address the needs of the poor.

Taken together, works of piety and works of mercy form the basic structure for spiritual formation in the Wesleyan tradition for the purpose of developing the character of Christ. The list of nine character qualities Paul mentions are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). These are the fruit of the Spirit Jesus embodied. If we're going to develop Christ-like character, we, too, must have these qualities in our lives. The character of Christ is built both through works of piety inwardly and works of mercy outwardly.

What are you doing for the journey of growth and maturity in your relationship with God inwardly and outwardly? Do you know that our church offers many opportunities for you to foster your spiritual growth and commitment to becoming faithful followers of Jesus Christ?

Attending worship regularly can be one of the holy habits you can work on. Participating in one or more small groups would be one of the ways you can work on your character-building. The small group ministry team of the church offers many groups including faith development groups, activity focused groups, and groups focused on service to others. This year, we offer several Disciple Study Groups with the intention to go deeper with God in our spiritual journey. You can join a 34-week, 24-week, and 8-week long study group on various days and times. We have two new small groups: one is called "Learning in Faith Together" for women of all ages who would like to grow in the relationship God. This group meets every Thursday from 9:30am to 11:15am. Another group is called "Faith-in-Action" meeting every Monday evening for connecting our faith with actions.

We build our character not only in church, but in all situations. Character development always involves a choice. By having a right choice, we develop character in all circumstances even in the circumstances with conflict, disappointment, difficulty, temptation, times of dryness, and delays. Which circumstance in your life would be a good place for you to build your character? Are you well with your soul in your circumstance by having this perspective? May the Sanctifying Grace of God encourage you and strengthen you in all circumstances to be more like Christ.