

THE VOCABULARY OF FAITH

10) Prevenient Grace

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For the past couple of months, we have been journeying through our vocabulary of faith together and looking at words we often hear said around the church, but that we may have not given much thought to. This morning we have a two word term we will be looking at: "Prevenient Grace." Now most of us are familiar with the word grace, but Prevenient may be new to you. However, it is my hope that by the end of this sermon you will not only feel comfortable with the term, but be able to identify it in your life.

But before we get started, I thought I would share an old analogy for how some define Divine Grace...If you have heard this one before please forgive me:

"How many points to get into Heaven?"

A man dies and goes to heaven.

St. Peter meets him at the Pearly Gates and says, "Here's how it works.

You need 100 points to make it into heaven.

You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was.

When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and was always faithful to her and loved her deep in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth two points!"

"Only two points?" the man says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithes and service."

"Terrific!" says St. Peter. "That's certainly worth a point."

"One point!?! I started a soup kitchen in my city and also worked in a shelter for homeless veterans."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," St. Peter says.

"Two points!?!!" Exasperated, the man cries, "At this rate, the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God."

This weekend marks the 1 year anniversary of the Large Earthquake in Napa county which created millions of dollars' worth of damage as well as physical injuries to some of the residents there...

And as we all know there have been numerous smaller earthquakes in the bay area over the past few months, and I remember seeing an interesting news segment on how some pets- Particularly dogs and birds have some way of detecting the coming earthquake a few moments before it actually hits.

I also saw that the state of California in partnership with CalTech and the United States Geological Service believes they will be able to develop an app that sends a message to all of our phones up to 9 seconds before an earthquake hits. While that might not seem like much time scientists say it is an extraordinary accomplishment.

Much like our pet's reactions and our developing technology call out Earthquakes before they hit, this morning's vocabulary of Faith Term, Prevenient Grace is what we acknowledge as God's grace offered to us before we even know it is coming.

Now let's take a moment and first define the word "Grace." Grace comes from the Greek word "Charis," which means gift.

Scripture tells us that God offers all of us the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. God's grace is a gift of love, which comes in many different facets.

Now, there is only one Grace, but it is expressed in three different ways:

- 1) Prevenient- Which we will be talking about this morning,
- 2) Justifying-Which Pastor Sunny will be speaking about next week and
- 3) Sanctifying-which Pastor Ron will be telling us about the week after that.

All of these terms for Grace are related to the various stages of our spiritual journey.

Prevenient grace is God's outreaching love that is present with us throughout our lives. From being formed in our mother's womb to birth and even to our very last breath, God is reaching out to us.

The term prevenient comes from the Latin meaning "to come before."

In classical theological terms it means: The grace that comes before any human decision is made to begin a relationship with the God of the universe.

To put it another way, prevenient grace is God pursuing us to be in right relationship with the divine.

When I first began college at Chico State, I remember there being a particular student who was always the most boisterous and energetic in our dorm. They were always making a scene in the dining hall dancing around and laughing.

And then this student started following me around and asking me questions all the time about my life and my recent travels abroad and then they started offering opinions on my life....For example, one time I was studying to get my motorcycle permit and this person came in and just started laughing at me and told me how ridiculous I would look on a motorcycle, let alone how dangerous it was for me to ride one.

Then this person kept offering to help me with a class assignment that I was struggling with....and finally, after a long weekend away from campus, I came back to find that this person actually had the nerve to go through the things in my dorm room and organized them...

I'll never forget marching over to their dorm room, knocking on the door as loud as I could and being ready to just tear into this person for invading my privacy like that.

But then the door opened....and I just lost all ability to speak....for the first time, I was able to see that Tall, Blonde, Young Woman in a different light....and I quickly realized this is the person who I want to care for me in my life...and I want to take care of her.

In two weeks, my wife Stephanie and I will be celebrating the 10 year anniversary of that moment. And while she went about it in an unorthodox way, I see now

how Stephanie was reaching into my life....caring for me before I even realized what was happening.

That is Prevenient Grace.....that is what God is doing for us.....reaching out.....caring for us even if we do not realize it.

Prevenient Grace is God's will drawing us to God's Self.

Prevenient Grace is the desire of God to pursue us throughout our lives to bring us into a relationship with the Lord.

It is a love that will never let us go.

As we heard this morning in our passage from I John, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.....We love because He first loved us."

God takes the first step....

As Pastors..... Sunny, Ron and I get to be involved in some of the most joyful experiences people have in their lives....Marriages, Births, Baptism....but at the same time we are involved in some of the darkest days in people's lives.

And what we have learned is that for some people, prevenient grace is found in a jail cell, in an AA meeting, in family counseling session or at the death of a loved one. There are times in our lives when the only place to look, is up; and we find God. A God who has been telling us that we have been loved all along and will be loved no matter what.

From the creation poem in Genesis we know that we are given free will to make our own decisions. And we know from our own experiences that many times we make the wrong decisions....decisions that separate us from one another....decisions that hurt others so we might be able to get ahead....decisions that are self-destructive.....

But we also know from the creation poem that we are created in the image and likeness of God. Each and every one of us is a spiritual being....we are "wired for God" from the very beginning.

Because we are created in God's image and likeness, the deepest and most essential part of us longs for a relationship with God. As the theologian Augustine said in his Confessions, "Our hearts will not find rest until they find rest in God."

As I spent this week thinking about Prevenient Grace, my mind started to wander people the theological and towards the practical....I started thinking about where else in my life and the life of the church do we see Prevenient Grace.

And when I am thinking I like to walk around so I was walking around the church campus thinking about this when I arrived right in front of our sanctuary doors...and looking at the sanctuary I realized, this whole place- San Ramon Valley UMC is an example of prevenient grace in my life,

Long before I was even born a group of dedicated Christians came from Walnut Creek and started what we know as SRVUMC.

Over the decades people shared their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness in order that this community of faith might grow—both physically and spiritually.

Wesley Center, the courtyard, the meditation Garden all gifts of grace built and offered to those, like myself, who would later come.

The gift of grace in the preschool that our church oversees and supports....a place that my son will learn about the world and about the love of God.

We discover that Prevenient Grace is all around us when we open our eyes and I think the challenge we have before us today is not only realizing all the grace that has been given to us, but asking the question of how we can be part of setting the table of Grace for the next generation...

When we look at our church budget each year where are we choosing to invest? Is it in the future? Is it in our young people? Is it in facilities that can be open and useful to people of all ages?

What can we do today that will be a blessing for the church and our community tomorrow?

When I look around at the Danville/Alamo and San Ramon area I can't but see the issue of unaffordable housing for young adults and young families.

It is ironic, because the vast majority of this community has worked to provide a safe environment for our children with some of the best schools in the state. But when our children grow up and are returning from college they quickly realize they cannot afford to live in the community that provided so much for them.

Where is the prevenient grace in that? What can we do as a church and as a community to enable our young people to come back and be a part of this community so they can raise children of their own in this nurturing environment?

What is our church doing to show grace in a way that helps alleviate the pain when we see all the divorce, the addictions, the financial strain and pressure to keep up with our neighbors?

If our ultimate goal as Christians is to be hands and feet of Jesus, then we need to not only respond to these issues at hand, but we need to be proactive in caring for, supporting and affirming those who need it most!

Being a church that lives our Prevenient Grace means we reach out to those whom the wider Christian church ignores. Those who have been wrongfully deemed unworthy of sitting in the pews. We need to be a community that practices radical hospitality and that says to each and every person that walks through our doors that God loves them and we love them.

But it even goes beyond that, because in order for us to follow God's example of taking the first step in Grace, we need to not only welcome people who come through our doors, but we need to go outside of the walls of the church and let people know that God loves them and we love them even if they didn't ask! Even if they weren't thinking about it...even if they gave up on the church long ago...we need to extend this grace to the world proactively.

In his book *Conspiracy of Kindness*, Pastor and author Steve Sogren talks about how simple acts of kindness done by his church have had a huge impact on their local community.

For example, Pastor Steve's congregation will put on car washes free of charge...and even if people try to donate money, they won't take it...and guess what the first questions people who get their cars washed ask....

"Then Why are you doing this?"

“What’s the catch?”

And always the members of the church respond with this simple answer: “We just wanted to show God’s love in a practical way.”

Most of the time, this led those receiving the car wash to ask more questions about the church, about belief, about why everyone seemed so happy...a relationships were formed. The community grew. People began to recognize that church as a place of grace...Grace that doesn’t wait for them to walk through the door of the sanctuary...but Grace that leaves the building and comes to them.

So again I ask, what can the San Ramon Valley United Methodist Church do to show our community just how much they are loved?

What can we do for ourselves as a Church that will benefit the next generation of our members?

In what ways can we learn to be flexible in order that those who are different than us can still be welcomed into the circle?

In what ways can service be incorporated into our daily lives instead of just being something we do a few times scattered throughout the year?

How do we change our words, our thoughts, our body language in a way that makes the first time visitor feel welcomed and valued?

No doubt it will take work....it will take time....and it will take help from the Holy Spirit, but I believe that we have all we need to carry on the Prevenient Grace God has showed us to the rest of our world.

At the end of our service may we not leave the church, but instead bring the church with us into the world.

Amen and Amen.