

Opening Prayer: Come Holy Spirit, heavenly dove, with all your quickening powers. Come share the Savior's love so that our souls might be quickened as well. Amen.

Justification and Assurance

John 10:22-29; II Corinthians 5:19 June 22, 2008
Romans 5:6-11; Romans 5:18-21

“God loves you and there’s nothing you can do about it.” Saying that to one another was how we ended our time together last week. Hopefully it was on your mind a time or two this past week. I find the phrase a wonderful way to remember what prevenient grace is all about – God’s commitment to us without our having to do a thing – without us doing a thing. It’s about the way God sees us – everyone of us – as beings God is in love with – cares about – wants to have a relationship with.

There comes a time when a light gets switched on in our head and in our heart and we say to ourselves or outloud: “Oh.” Or, “Aha.” Or, “OH! I’m included. God cares about me. I don’t have to earn God’s love. It’s not about how much I know or how much good I do but simply God’s universal perspective concerning all people – even me.” Justifying grace is simply coming to the realization in our heads and hearts that God’s grace is available to everyone who have faith in Jesus Christ.

On May 24, 1738, John Wesley entered a church on Aldersgate Street. He was a young Anglican priest at the time. He struggled constantly with a sense of guilt and feelings of being unacceptable. He wrote in his journal his sense of what happened that night in the Aldersgate church: “In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society on Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther’s *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans*. About a quarter to nine, while he was describing the change that God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warm. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation. An assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”¹

In his sermon “A Celebration of Charles Wesley’s Hymns on Grace,” Foundry United Methodist Church’s senior minister, Rev. Dean Snyder, beautifully and profoundly noted: “Justifying grace is our experience of God’s grace and love. It is when we begin to accept God’s love for us and begin to learn to accept and love ourselves. The great evangelical compulsion of early Methodism was to have people come to know, to believe and to accept the profound love of God for each one, for every person. Love divine, all love excelling. The Wesleys taught that our acceptance of God’s grace does not change whether God loves us or not. God’s love for us is unconditional and permanent no matter what we do. God’s love continues under any and every circumstance of life.

“But our surrender to God’s love, to the grace of God, changes everything for us. It brings us into a relationship with God that is two-way, that is mutual. The experience of grace leads to a sense of being justified. If you were justified, in the language that the British used at that time, it meant that you had been tried and had been found innocent of a crime. So, being justified meant being in a right relationship with God. It meant experiencing a sense of forgiveness. It meant experiencing release and freedom from guilt. It meant a growing desire to live as though we are people who are acceptable and lovable.

“John Wesley preached about new birth and conversion, but always very carefully. The new birth and our conversion are our response to God’s love. They are not something we do to get saved. We always exist under

the grace and love of God. We are always saved. But new birth and conversion are our opening ourselves to the experience of salvation, opening our hearts and lives to the love that is always there for us.”²

I think I’ve shared the story with you before about one of the times when this awareness – this assurance – of God’s caring about even me was especially real. It was at a time in my life when I wasn’t feeling especially good about myself. I was skinny and shy – two things I certainly can’t claim about myself today. I lacked self-confidence. Let’s just say I didn’t feel very good about myself.

I was with a bunch of friends at the Defiance District Senior High Institute at Lakeside, Ohio. Rev. Joe Hale was the speaker of the week. He was an evangelist in the United Methodist Church and a magician. He combined the two when he preached and I remember being fascinated by both his preaching and the way he made his gift of magic and personality available to God to bring a message to us.

During the communion service on the final night I remember feeling funny – that’s how I described it in those days – my stomach felt like it had butterflies fluttering all around in it – my heart fairly raced – and I left South Auditorium that night at the end of the service with an assurance about my being loved and one of God’s in a way that has made all the difference in my life sense. Oh, I was still confused about many things about myself. I walked for hours that night with a former pastor of my home church, Rev. Warren Powell and we talked about many things.

Now, some call what happened to me that night a “being born again” experience, and I referenced it as such for many years. Today I recognize it as one of many experiences – some before and some after – that brought me to the place and continue to be reminders that I am loved by God – cared for by God – forgiven by God.

Justifying grace comes to some suddenly, like the experience I just described in my life. It comes much more often much more gradually. Despite the description I’ve just offered I really feel it’s been much more gradual than sudden for me really – and, it’s still in process. It’s ongoing.

Ken Carder said in his sermon on “Transforming Grace”: “Justifying grace, which may come suddenly or gradually, is the assurance that we are forgiven daughters and sons of God. Justification is being claimed as children of God – the infinitely, unconditionally loved children of God. That is what Wesley experienced at Aldersgate Street. He felt claimed and forgiven by God. He personally accepted God’s redemptive acts in Jesus Christ. He came to a new way of viewing himself. His worth and identity were contained in whom he belonged to, not in his accomplishments or achievements.”³

Carder went on in that sermon to both reference his own encounter with justifying grace and assurance. “This self-acceptance based on God’s acceptance has been a long time coming to me. As one who has sought to escape the dungeon of feelings of inferiority through academic achievement, professional competency, and religious devotion, I can testify to the liberating power of an identity based on what God has done rather than on what I must do. Identity, self-worth, and security rooted in God’s unconditional love and God’s claim upon us set us free to be who we are, and who we are is nothing less than daughters and sons of the Eternal One whose name and nature is Love.”⁴

And then he offered one of the standard illustrations used by those who try to help persons visualize the connection between the three aspects of grace delineated by Wesley: “If prevenient grace is the porch of vital religion, then justifying grace is the doorway. The door always has a welcome sign on it. It is a doorway into a

new identity, a new family home, and a new future. Just as some may live their lives on the porch, so also may others get stuck in the doorway. They assume that entrance through the door is the end of the journey. Consequently, they spend their days either standing in the doorway, reveling (narcissistically – rather selfishly and self-pleasing) in their relationship with God, or staying close to the entrance in a desperate attempt to hold onto the freshness of entering the doorway for the first time.”⁵ That brings us right up to sanctifying grace which is the subject of next week’s sermon and you’ll have to come back to explore it with me.

There’s a freedom we become aware of when we come to the realization that justifying grace awakens in our lives. We know we aren’t perfect but that we are accepted and forgiven by a gracious God despite our condition as sinners. We don’t have to continue defending our lack of perfectness. It is the spirit that works this miraculous mystery within us – that causes us to be assured of God’s love of us. It is the spirit that testifies in us of our worthiness.

Another preacher tells the story of an attractive woman in her 30’s who stopped in to see him one day. Hear it in his own words: “She came into my office smiling, a sparkle in her eyes. This was not the same person with whom I had been counseling. Something had happened, she was changed. I had not visited with her for two or three months, but I had seen her often prior to that. I remember the first time I met her. She showed up at our church, none of us knew her, but she asked the secretary if it would be alright to see me. And I’m glad I was available. I’ve never seen a more nervous, anxious uncertain person. She slumped in her chair, glancing at me only occasionally. Unconsciously clenching and unclenching her hands. She spoke haltingly in jerky phrases, but managed to communicate the fact that she had heard of our church’ mission emphasis, particularly our work in Mexico, and she wanted to be a part of it. If she couldn’t participate in a personal way, she’d like to make a monthly contribution. The amount she mentioned seemed astronomical to me in relation to what she must be earning. That was the beginning of sporadic, then regular visits together. Always the elements of doing something, trying harder, giving more, were a part of her stance. Her feelings of needing to prove, to earn respect, to do good in order to be good merged at every turn. She wanted to start a preschool for the economically deprived. She’d like to work in our tutoring program in the Mexican/American community. What were we doing about family planning in our Mexico mission? Were we really aware of the plight of the elderly?

“As inspiring as her dedication to humanity was, I always felt a bit depressed after being with her. Though we shared a common commitment and she began to reveal a few hidden corners of her inner self, I never felt that we made any significant personal contact. When our eyes met, it would only be momentarily. She couldn’t really look at me. Her slumped body and her clenched hands continued to symbolize an uncertain, timid, searching, cowering person. But this day she was different. She had tried to see me a number of times that week, but hadn’t made it. I knew she had made an application to spend 6 months in Latin America as a mission volunteer, at her own expense, and I thought that’s what she wanted to talk about. But I was wrong. And when I saw her, I knew it. She was standing straight. She entered my office with a kind of bounce. She looked at me, smilingly. There was aglow on her face, and she began to talk freely. Who is this, I thought to myself. Certainly not the timid, struggling, frustrated, do-gooder I had known three months ago.

“It was only moments before she was telling a simple but profound story. All the ingredients of self effortful salvation had been there. Trying to do good, so God would accept her. Never feeling holy enough or righteous enough and laboring in her humanitarian causes so she would feel comfortable when she prayed. Straining efforts to make everything right in her life, in order to sense some worthiness. Do you identify? How many of us is that the story of? The whole scheme of seeking to work out her own salvation, to prove herself worthy to

be accepted by God, and all a big dead end. Then she learned that God loved her just as she was. How she learned it is another story, but she learned that God loved her and accepted her just as she was. She didn't earn that love, nor could she. She couldn't buy it or ever deserve it. Yet she was loved and accepted. I'll never forget the image that she used to tell of that experience. It was a great image. She said, 'I was trying to pry open the window in order to get into the house, when all the time the door was open and I had only to walk through.' (She) is different now. Changed, free, confident, filled with meaning, alive. As Paul would put it, the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ, had shone in her face."⁶

God loves us and there's nothing we can do about it. We can't stop God from loving us, but we can acknowledge it to be true – believe it with our minds and in our hearts. And when we do, we will know the justifying grace and assurance that is so necessary for our lives to be transformed and for us to be the disciples of Christ we are called to be.

The Invitation to Christian Discipleship this morning is an invitation to accept God's grace – God's reaching out in love to forgive and redeem us – you, yes, even you.

Let us pray.

1. John Wesley, *Journal*, May 24, 1738.
2. Dean Snyder, "A Celebration of Charles Wesley's Hymns on Grace," May 28, 2006, www.foundryumc.org/sermons/5_28_2006.htm.
3. Kenneth L. Carder, "Transforming Grace," Sermons On United Methodist Beliefs (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), pp. 54-55.
4. Ibid., p. 55.
5. Ibid.
6. Maxie Dunnam, "Justification by Grace Through Faith," www.esermons.com, 2006, 0-000-000-400.