

Prayer: Almighty and Merciful God, help us to find our lives by offering them to you. Grant us wisdom to understand your will and the energy to bring your will into our daily lives. Amen.

Sanctification and Perfection

Matthew 5:43-48; Philippians 3:12-21 June 29, 2008

Susan Andrews is a female pastor in another denomination. She and her husband are both pastors. She tells of a time in her life when she was offered the gift of grace from someone she considered an enemy and how the experience transformed her life.

She and her husband were responding to a call to be co-pastors of a church in New Jersey. The pastoral nominating committee, that denomination's equivalent to our Staff-Parish Relations Committee, was split. Seven were for them being called and four were against it. The pastoral couple knew it wasn't usually wise to accept a call to a church when the committee didn't have closer to a unanimous mindset, but they were assured that the issue was really more within the committee and that was probably the best vote any candidate could expect.

Well, there was one member in particular on the committee who was opposed to the couple. Pearl was her name. She was a strong-minded, fairly conservative elder who was also the clerk of the session. There wasn't much about the couple that she liked – she didn't like their theology – didn't like that they were a clergy couple – and she really didn't like the fact that a woman was going to be one of her pastors. The vote by the whole congregation was very favorable but still Pearl wasn't convinced. She didn't like them and she wasn't about to accept them as her pastors.

Several weeks into the new situation and Pastor Susan was feeling pretty awful. Oh, the congregation had been welcoming enough, but she still felt pretty much like a stranger – felt like the congregation was more accepting of her husband than of her. About the time the thought entered her mind that perhaps they had made a mistake, the doorbell rang.

She opened the door and there stood Pearl – with a broom, a loaf of bread and a shaker of salt. Pearl smiled at Pastor Susan and said, “I come from German stock, and there is an old tradition in our family. Whenever someone moves into a new home they are given three gifts: a broom to sweep away the evil spirits, a loaf of bread to make their house into a home, and a pinch of salt to bring good luck. I want to welcome you to your new home – and to welcome you as my new pastor.”

Susan said that the two of them never did see eye to eye theologically but that their relationship changed that day into a relationship of grace rather than one of hostility. She noted that she decided to love her enemy that day and as a result felt like she had finally come home.¹

I'm pretty sure most of you are familiar with the story of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* (lay miz). Jean was released from prison after nineteen years of being incarcerated for stealing some bread to feed his sister's children. He had a difficult time finding a place to stay or work because of his criminal record. Finally, he stumbled into the bishop's house. The bishop offered him hospitality and treated him kindly. Jean Valjean was bewildered by the bishop's actions but when the opportunity arose, he stole the bishop's silver plates and fled with them.

The bishop's reaction was not what most of us would expect of someone who has been wronged to the extent the bishop was. The bishop chose to examine his own behavior rather than become angry and condemning. He noted: "I have for a long time wrongfully withheld this silver; it belonged to the poor. Who was this man? A poor man evidently," he reasoned. After the police captured Valjean with the silver in his possession, they brought him to the bishop. After greeting the thief the bishop said, "But I gave you the candlesticks also ... why did you not take them along with the plates?" Surprised and confused, the police reluctantly left Valjean go.²

Writer and surgeon, Bernie Siegel, told a story about an inmate in a concentration camp lovingly named by others "Wild Bill." He'd served the enemy as an interpreter for six years. Still he was gentle, positive, full of energy and healthy. He was a beacon of hope to the others in the camp. He was an agent of reconciliation. He was always urging the others to forgive each other and their enemies. There's a reason the others listened and admired him.

The amazing fact (you see) was that he had watched his own family – his wife, two daughters, and three little boys – all be shot by the Nazi soldiers in Warsaw. He was asked how he was able to do what he did – seemingly lack bitterness. Wild Bill's response was: "I had to decide right then whether to let myself hate the soldiers who had done this. It was an easy decision, really. I was a lawyer. In my practice I had seen too often what hate could do to people's minds and bodies. Hate had just killed the six people who matter most to me in the world. I decided then that I would spend the rest of my life – whether it was a few days or many years – loving every person I came in contact with."³

O.K., here's the intent of starting with these three stories: there are two sides to the gospel of Jesus Christ – "a believing and a behaving side!" This Christian journey we're on isn't just about being redeemed. It's also about being responsible. It's both a way of believing and of living. Another church leader put it this way: "There are no conditions to God's grace. God's grace is free. It is absolutely unconditional, but there are consequences!"⁴

The behaving side – the consequence side of the gospel – is sanctifying grace. Once we've become aware of the awesome aspect of grace we refer to as prevenient grace – that God loves us unconditionally and there's nothing we can do about it. Once we respond to that awesome aspect of God's grace and we accept it for ourselves – have our hearts warmed by its reality – well, then we are invited – we are propelled – we are drawn into this life of exploring the rest of the house so that we might become more and more like Jesus. Once inside the house we start working on being holy. That is, we start trying to reflect God's presence in us and through us. Sanctifying work is transforming work. Reading the scriptures is part of it – attending worship is part of it – praying is part of it – doing the things Christ would do is part of it.

Being sanctified isn't about becoming holier-than-thou though. It's not about acting like we're holy. It's about getting our hands and our feet and our souls dirty so that we might better reflect Jesus' still walking in the world.

Another preacher offered in one of his sermons on the things noted in the Sermon on the Mount that they shouldn't be regarded as just another set of commandments or impossible things we have to do in order to earn the title of disciple or to get out ticket for heaven stamped. They shouldn't be seen as ideals or aspirations only saints can accomplish – things we ordinary followers can't ever hope to do.

He said: “Those who first received these instructions about loving and praying for enemies were only beginners at following Jesus. No one had done it before; they were all pioneers, what we would call rookies, what the New Testament calls learners or apprentices, which is what the word disciple means. They were not plumbers, but only plumbers’ helpers, learning the names of the tools, dirty and smelly and contributing little. They were not pilots, but students in ground school, learning the first lessons of weather and how a wing gives lift. Not Saint Peter, but Peter the goober! Not Peter, James, and John as the inside circle, but more like the Three Stooges. No different than we are. As one observer put it, ‘Jesus did not call the qualified; he qualified the called.’ They were not extraordinary (people); they were everyday (people) with an extraordinary new friend.”⁵

It’s not about being experts. It’s about being available. It’s about showing up and being willing to learn from Jesus – knowing God the Creator, hanging around Jesus the Savior, and watching the activity of the Holy Spirit and being moved by it all to the point where we willingly enter into it.⁶

One more quote from this preacher’s sermon: “What does (Jesus) demand? Not only no killing, but a heart free from the acids of chronic anger and the cold calculation of bitterness. Not only no adultery, but no lust that sees people as objects of pleasure only - and no throwing away of spouses. Not only no false swearing with God’s name, but no swearing at all because your words are to be simple and true. Not only no revenge, the disciple must respond with creative non-violence that turns the other cheek, voluntarily goes a second mile, and lives with an open wallet. Not only the love of the neighbor, the one who is like me and shares my prejudices, but showing love to the one who is not like me, the enemy and the outsider, not only in action but in prayer to God for them and me. (And here’s the part we need to hear.) I can’t do these things on my own, and neither can you; that’s just the point. But, and here is the good news, in the company of Jesus and through the interior work of (the) Spirit we can be changed so that we begin to desire impossible things, and then, by the miracle of God’s supporting grace, find ourselves sometimes getting it right and surprising even ourselves! Jesus welcomes us into a parallel reality called the kingdom of God. We are invited to plug in! It is a new world in the midst of the old.”⁷

It’s a legend, but as with most legends it reveals a powerful truth. A prince had a crooked back. He wanted to have a straight back – be tall like his image of a prince worthy of the title. He had a sculptor carve a statue of himself tall and erect as he believed he should be. The finished product was placed in the palace garden into which the prince went several times each day. And every time he did he stopped in front of the statue and imagined himself as the image he saw. The people began to notice a change in him. He did indeed become tall and erect. He grew into the likeness of his ideal image.⁸

God’s goal for us is that our lives look like the life of Jesus. Jesus’ likeness is stamped all over the rooms in the sanctifying grace house. True, we stumble and fall often. But every time we do there is that door with the welcome sign on it inviting us to enter again and claim our identity as daughters and sons of God – brothers and sisters of and in Christ.⁹

The passion of the United Methodist Church for mission and social justice emerged from this understanding of sanctifying grace on the part of the Wesleys. They taught that the more open we are to the love of God in our own lives the more loving toward others it has to make us.

Rev. Dean Snyder, whose sermon on the hymns of grace I referenced last week, noted in that same sermon: “One of the most controversial teachings of the early Methodist movement was the teaching that it was possible for us to realize Christian perfection in this life, which meant perfect love, loving perfectly. John Wesley

emphasized that as we become more and more filled with the love of God, this will lead to acts of mercy and works of justice.

“So, the Methodist movement poured itself out to the poor. It operated soup kitchens, literacy programs teaching people how to read, children and adults. It made loans to help people start their own businesses. It is no accident that in England the labor movement grew out of Methodism. Almost all of the first, early labor unions were Methodists who believed that justice for people and for workers was a part of what it meant to be perfect in love.

“The early Methodist movement opposed slavery. It opposed governmental policies that kept poor people poor. ...we also remember that early Methodism taught that war was a sign that we had not yet received the perfect love of God. The early Methodists and the Wesleys taught that war was incompatible with Christian teaching and that if we were truly open to the love of God in our lives, if we truly allowed the love of God to transform us, war would not exist any more.”¹⁰

Experiencing sanctifying grace is not about grudgingly and joylessly doing good works because we know we should or restraining from doing things that we know we shouldn't. The Wesleyan understanding of sanctification was that it involves our wills and affections being transformed – that we come to the place where we love and desire the things that God loves. “We do what is right and avoid what is evil because that is what transformed wills truly desire. In Charles Wesley's words, ‘I want a principle within of watchful, godly fear, a sensibility of sin, a pain to feel it near.’”¹¹

God's sanctifying grace allows us to grow and mature in our ability to live as Jesus lived. Praying, studying the scriptures, fasting, worshiping, sharing fellowship with other Christians, responding compassionately to those in need, working for justice all helps to create more capacity within us to love our neighbors – near and far.

We are instructed to press on and with God's help this path of sanctification will deposit us at perfection. Wesley's doctrine of perfection didn't say that we would not make any mistakes or have any weaknesses. His understanding was that it was a continual process of being made perfect and removing our desire to sin.¹²

Prevenient grace is that grace which is always there even when we are not aware of God's love for us. Justifying grace happens over and over again because we need to be reminded over and over again of God's love and acceptance of us and thus need to repent and believe it to be true again and again. Sanctifying or perfecting grace is about our maturing as followers of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

1. Susan R. Andrews, “The Offense of Grace,” Sermons for Sundays: In Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany: (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 0788023233a.
2. Ibid., as referenced in “The Offense of Grace.”
3. Ibid.
4. Durwood L. Buchheim, “Whatever Happened to Sanctification?” www.esermons.com, The Power to Change, (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1993), 1-55673-216-6.
5. Phil Thraikill, “Loving Like God Loves,” as preached at Duncan Memorial UMC on June 18, 2006.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

8. Kenneth L. Carder, Sermons on UM Beliefs (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 56.
9. Ibid., p. 56.
10. Dean Snyder, “A Celebration of Charles Wesley’s Hymns of Grace,” May 28, 2006, as preached at Foundry United Methodist Church, www.foundryumc.org/sermons5_28_2006.htm.
11. Ted A. Campbell, Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 58 – 59.
12. Kenneth L. Carder, Who are We: Doctrine, Ministry, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church: Revised Leader’s Guide (Nashville: Cokesbury), p. 46 (as quoted on www.umc.org/site).