

***Shiloh United Methodist Church***  
Grace Comes In Threes

2nd Thessalonians    Rev. Tyler Amundson    October 27, 2019  
2:13-17

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>13</sup> But we always must thank God for you, brothers and sisters who are loved by God. This is because he chose you from the beginning to be the first crop of the harvest. This brought salvation, through your dedication to God by the Spirit and through your belief in the truth.<sup>14</sup> God called all of you through our good news so you could possess the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>15</sup> So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold on to the traditions we taught you, whether we taught you in person or through our letter. <sup>16</sup> Our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and a good hope. <sup>17</sup> May he encourage your hearts and give you strength in every good thing you do or say.

A young pastor once went out and tried to do the farming work with his congregation. He learned quickly that haying was not his thing, that caring for livestock was not his thing, and that running the machinery was not his thing. After a few days of trying to help out one of the members of his congregation the farmer said, “Preacher why don’t you keep growing our spirits with good sermons, and leave the farming to me. I think we both will serve God better that way.”

This young preachers name was Gary, and he tried to take this comment with as much grace as possible. Then a few days later he was studying scripture and discovered a passage about Christ saying, “My yolk is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.”

Recognizing the farmer was asking him to write sermons he asked the farmer, “What is the purpose of a yolk?” He responded, “To share the

burden. When two animals wear a yolk for work, it splits the labor.” Not only that, but the farmer went on to share that the yolk is custom made for the animal to share the load. It helps a less experienced animal learn from an experienced animal to not push too hard and hurt itself.<sup>1</sup>

Grace, God’s unconditional love, that comes from the Greek word Agape should be understood this way. God is helping us to be fit with a custom made yolk, for Christ to share our burden, so we can meander through this life together.

These last two months we have been exploring Faith By Numbers a series grounded in learning the story of John Wesley the found of Methodism and helping us understand the practices that guide us to draw a masterpiece of faith in God’s grace. We have studied 3 simple rules of Methodism, Means of grace found in acts of piety(relating to God) and acts of mercy(relating to others), and today we are wrapping up this incredible understanding of God’s activity in our lives by studying 3 levels or understandings of God’s grace or love.

You can find these 3 understandings of grace the back of your Grow, Pray, Study guide. These 3 understandings of grace are not levels that necessarily build upon each, but they can. These 3 understandings of grace are what Wesley believed God’s love could do to transform our lives.

1. Prevenient – Loved no matter when, where or what.
2. Justifying – Transformed by love into a new life.
3. Sanctifying – Shaped by love to meet each moment.

Today our message is going to touch on these three using another character from history you are familiar with, but first I want to end the story of John we have been hearing this whole series.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from pg 67 of Shockley, G. A. (2007). *The meandering way: leading by following the spirit*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute.

John we now know is John Wesley the founder of the Methodist tradition. In John's life he would end up writing, preaching, and sharing messages of God's grace daily for his whole life. He averaged 15 sermons a week, and as his Journal indicates, he preached more than 40,000 sermons in his career, traveling the length and breadth of England—altogether more than 250, 000 **miles**—many times during an age when roads were often only muddy ruts. His only concession to travel later in life was a carriage instead of a riding horse himself.

He died at the age of 87 in 1791, with a message for all who gathered round. As he drew his final breaths it is said that he shared the words, “The best of all, God is with us.” And again for clarity, “The best of all, God is with us.”

What I love about Wesley, and you will learn if you study him with me. I love that he was not perfect, that he nearly failed, and that he struggled. I believe it is a reminder that God uses all sorts of people to share God's love, and especially the imperfect ones.

That is why I love our scripture for today. It comes from 2 Thessalonians and again a reminder of an imperfect thing offering us an understanding of Grace. If you study this letter you will learn a few things quickly. You will learn that this writing style is very different from 1 Thessalonians, who was for sure written by Paul. Second, that the people writing this text appear to be much more concerned with preserving their specific understanding of God, rather than sharing it with others. 3. Even through their bungled attempts at trying to mimic the writings of Paul, they get one things very right. God's grace is still trying to transform this world.

The final two passages of this section we read today highlight this reality. “<sup>16</sup> Our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and a good hope. <sup>17</sup> May he encourage your hearts and give you strength in every good thing you do or say.” “in every good thing you do or say.” The word good is the

Greek *agathos*, it means even these people trusted that the good done in the love of God will transform the greater good of the world.

I want to be clear, the message of grace, that comes in threes, is that God will always use the seemingly imperfect, less than whole, seemingly struggling people, to transform the world. Even when they don't think they can do such a thing.

Let me share an example of this in history.

There was a man who once died by accidentally being shot by a few young boys playing with a gun. This wound would be fatal to him. When questioned by the police the man would not identify who had shot him, many believe to this day is that it was to protect the young men from being persecuted for something for which he knew they already had great guilt from doing.

This young man was the son of Dutch reform preacher. He knew from a young age that God's love was for all people. At a younger age he failed the entrance exam for seminary, to train as a preacher, so he went off to serve people. He found himself serving poor miners, some of who had been injured greatly in an accident. This young man was said to be so selfless he would tear his own bedsheets to make bandages to help these men out. That by his sacrifice they committed to serving a Christ of grace.

A church committee who oversaw this young man, believed he was placing too much Enthusiasm into his work, so they forced him to end his service and return home. This nearly broke this young man and he would struggle with challenges his entire life. It also sent his relationship with his father to a very difficult place.

This kind of sharing of God's love with out knowing is trusting that God is working before we arrive somewhere, and will continue loving even

after we leave a place. It is what we know as prevenient grace. God's love is there no matter when, where or what is happening.

The man I have been talking about in this story is none other than the world renowned impressionist painter, Vincent Van Gogh. We would not know his story at all if it were not for his beautiful art, and in fact I imagine his story would have been a tragedy lost to time.<sup>2</sup>

Despite all the adversity Van Gogh faced he continued to depict the beauty of the world in his art and living. This is what we call justifying grace, the second type of grace. This is a grace that transforms us into a new life. The best images from scripture for this are the new birth Jesus and Paul talk about, or baptism coming into a new life in this understanding of God loving us. Justifying grace is that we are transformed by love, found in Christ, into living a new life.

In Luke 15:1-2 you will find a passage that reads this way. **15** All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. <sup>2</sup> The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

I believe Van Gogh was transformed by his early life experiences caring for others. He learned that God's love was at work in the world before he arrived. I also believe he let God's love keep transforming him taking seriously this passage from Luke 15. He got it a lot of trouble with his preacher father when he invited a prostitute to come live with him, a prostitute who was pregnant and who had been abandoned by the father of the child. Van Gogh cared for her without expectation, and despite pressures from his family to abandon her.

This conflict would lead to a falling out with his father that was both violent and challenging, Van Gogh would go deeper into a depression

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<sup>2</sup> <http://godreports.com/2012/11/vincent-van-goghs-unapp>

and find himself abusing substances. Yet, despite all these challenges he continued to produce beautiful pieces of art.

Van Gogh once said, '...to try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, that leads to God. One man wrote or told it in a book, another in a picture.'

Van Gogh is a reminder that there is no clear cut change, the master God, keeps working on us to be transformed throughout the adversity of our lives.

Van Gogh would not be seen as a good artist in his own day, and in fact I would say he was continually rejected based on the historical readings I have found. Yet, he kept trying to express the beauty he saw in the world. Grace kept working to transform his life.

The final type of grace is sanctifying grace, grace that shapes us by love to meet each moment with the grace God offers us. This may be the hardest grace to embrace, because it involves us knowing we are loved. It makes me wonder if Van Gogh did not have some spiritual experience that let him know God continued to work grace out in his life.

Now, I want to sidetrack us to understand more what such an experience might look like. So, for this example we are going to enter the science fiction world of today. You knew with a geek of a pastor like me this would happen eventually. In the BBC show, Dr. Who an alien travels through time fixing and shaping the timeline of earth to keep it right. In one episode Dr. Who takes a tortured Van Gogh into the future to hear how his art has transformed peoples' lives. Pay attention to how Van Gogh receives this news and think what it would be like to be rejected in your life, and to hear this kind of worldly acceptance.

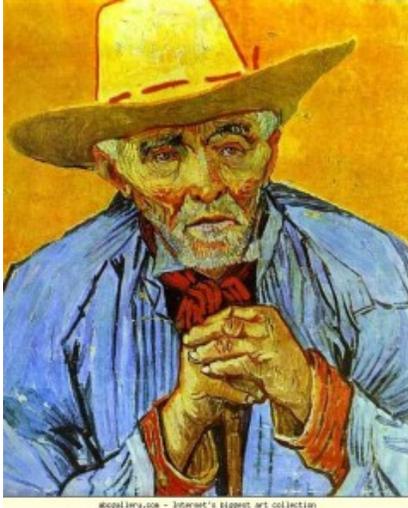
We watched: [https://youtu.be/ubTJI\\_UphPkreciated-journey-with-christ/](https://youtu.be/ubTJI_UphPkreciated-journey-with-christ/)



"To me, Van Gogh is the finest painter of them all. He transformed the pain of his tormented life into ecstatic beauty. Pain is easy to portray, but to use your passion and pain to portray the ecstasy and joy and magnificence of our world, no one had ever done it before."



Imagine what it would be like to hear the difference your work in the world had made. Here is the thing about Grace, God is telling you your work matters. It is said that this image of a peasant was one Van Gogh painted when he met a random peasant who looked so like his father he could not fail to paint it, a father who he struggled against, and yet like Jesus used the image of a parent Van Gogh knew his heavenly parent was reaching out.



Van Gogh's art gives us hope for the beauty of our world. He also shared these quotes which I think should give us hope for the beauty of God's love, that we explore in this thing called Christianity.

'Christ alone, of all the philosophers, magicians, etc., has affirmed eternal life as the most important certainty, the infinity of time, the futility of death, the necessity and purpose of serenity and devotion. He lived serenely, as an artist greater than all other artists, scorning marble and clay and paint, working in the living flesh.

'In other words, this peerless artist, scarcely conceivable with the blunt instrument of our modern, nervous and obtuse brains, made neither statues nor paintings nor books. He maintained in no uncertain terms that he made ... living men(women and all people), immortals.'<sup>3</sup>

Today as you walk away from this service I am sending you with two things. One if you have not yet taken a spiritual gifts inventory and shared the results with us, please do. It is something I hope to use to support you as your pastor to find where God might be calling you to share your gifts in God's grace in the world. I have paper ones or go

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/the-profound-christian-faith-of-vincent-van-gogh/106440.htm>

online and take this inventory found on your GPS.

[www.shilohbillings.church/spiritual-gifts](http://www.shilohbillings.church/spiritual-gifts)

Second, I am going to ask us to renew the vows as a congregation, to what we are called to do. These vows are what we ask new members and I believe all of us, new or longtime are called to recommit to these continually. So, as an act of committing to living out, seeking and knowing God's grace I ask you to join us as we renew our vows today. Please hear the statements I read and respond with a hearty, "Amen."

(Please refer to video or audio of service to hear reaffirmation of vows.)

Amen.

Benediction:

**What each of us longs for the most is to be both fully known and fully loved. Miraculously, God feels the same way about us. God, too, wants to be fully known and fully loved. God wants this so much that He has promised to knock down every obstacle in the way, enduring even His own death, to be with us, to consummate this love.**

**Rachel Held Evans**