

***Shiloh United Methodist Church***  
Grace by Any Means

1 John 4:19

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October 6, 2019

1 John 4:19 Common English Bible (CEB)

<sup>19</sup> We love because God first loved us.

Pastor Evans gave a slight smile as she met Roger. Roger would be her intern pastor for the next year. Her smile grew as they talked, especially when Roger shared all he hoped to get out of his “field experience.”

She glanced at the sheet of paper on which Roger had typed his project ideas:

Preach every other week on the gifts of the spirit and its ramifications on the great issues of our world today.

Lead weekly adult Bible study.

Develop a community program for the appreciation of hymns in support of faithful living.

Serve on the board of a local non-profit agency.

Teach a comprehensive overview of the history of communion practices from the first century.

“That is quite a list, Roger,” pastor Evans said. “you have great things planned. I think you should start right at the top. I want you to teach three- and four-year-old Sunday school class.”

Roger’s proud, confident smile dimmed noticeably. “Kids?” he asked. “Don’t you have some, uh, mother, to do that?”

“You’ll do fine, Roger,” Pastor Evans said.

Sunday morning came along. Roger was introduced during worship. He did very well because he had studied hard in worship class. But as the Sunday school hour approached, his confidence waned.

Roger walked into the basement classroom, which contained a shortened table, seven tiny chairs, and five little children, running around in a spirited game of ninja acolyte.

“Okay, children, let’s sit down,” said Roger. “I want to tell you about the influence of the Byzantine Empire on early church writings.”

“Hey, Mr. Pastor, how did Jesus know when to get up on Easter?” asked Clark.

“Hey, Pastor Jesus, do angels live at your house?” asked Tiffany.

“Hey, Pastor Pastor, why did God make my goldfish die?” asked Steven.

Roger was terrified. He had no answers. He did not know what to say to these children. How would he teach them the important things of the faith?

Lisa seeing Roger’s troubled look, walked up to him, took his hand. “Don’t worry Pastor, Jesus loves you. I love you, too. Come and sit with us.”<sup>1</sup>

This month we continue our faith by numbers series. This study is designed to help give you the template from which you can become an artist of your faith. The last month we started by learning the outer edges of our faith, how to follow Jesus’ golden rule of loving God and

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *The Lost Notebook* found on page 103 in Jensen, R. A. (1994). *56 lectionary stories for preaching: based upon the revised common lectionary, cycle C*. Lima, OH: CSS Pub. Co.

loving others. We did this by learning the three rules core to the Methodist practice of Christianity. Do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.

If you look on the back of your Grow Pray Study guide for today you will find a Methodist cross(bottom of these notes). I invite you to look at that cross. On it you will find a line between God and Neighbor. This is the line we have been studying the last several weeks. The three simple rules move from how we treat our neighbor to how we connect with God.

The other line going between personal and communal is what we will be studying this month as we learn an important understanding of our faith as Christians, grace. Each of the 4 other areas: Devotion, Mercy, Justice, and Worship could be best understood as the practices that maintain our balance between loving God and neighbor and doing this as an individual and a community. These 4 areas are the colors of grace, the colors of God's love.

This entire month we will be focusing on grace and this first Sunday, I want to help us grasp an understanding and better yet to understand what the feeling of God's love might be in your life.

Our scripture for today was chosen for this reason alone, it is the sum of why Jesus' refers to God's love to being like that of a cosmic parent or as a relational love, it is to remind us that God loves us before we can imagine, and God's love continues beyond our understanding. The founder of Methodism John Wesley says this about the passage from 1 John we heard today:

*This is the sum of all religion, the genuine model of Christianity. None can say more: why should any one say less, or less intelligibly? – Wesley's notes on 1 John*

The word Christians have associated with this since the early days of our tradition is the word Grace. Grace embodies the entire cross you have

on the back of your GPS. Grace is the timeless nature of God's love, and a reminder that God's love permeates our very soul.

This understanding, this grace thing is so important it appears 156 times in 148 verses of the new testament. In Greek the word is "cheris" and has sometimes been translated poorly into English as charity. This is a poor translation because I think it appears too much like God is giving something out of pity or in hopes of something in return. When instead I believe grace needs to be understood as giving away freely. God's love is given away and received best when one is free to experience it.

Let me stop for a minute, because if you are like me in any way. Abstract terms were not my best way of learning. When I was growing up a teacher could draw an apple falling on Newton's head on the board thousands of times and I would not get gravity. However, when a teacher would drop a bowling ball and a tennis ball from the roof of a school to demonstrate it, well then I would pay attention.

I want to take a minute and share with you a short film of a physics professor showing the way physics works in a very tangible way. Let's watch this video by Walter Lewin:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXXF2C-vrQE>

I love this video about pendulum physics, because it explains the complex mathematics that guide different forces. It is examples like this that we have to search for to understand Grace and like not breaking your chin. Grace takes no added energy to have it come to you, you need to remember Grace is freely given by God.

Let's turn back to the character of John, John is someone's story we have been following the last month in our sermons. John when we last left him had returned from a failed attempt at working in a new land, fleeing with a warrant for his arrest. He had arrived home feeling like a failure and was asking what worth he had to offer anyone.

Between a friend and a bible study he had experienced a feeling of knowing that he was loved and feeling he was loved by God, even if he himself doubted it. He said in the experience that his heart was “strangely warmed.” I want you to stop for a minute and think about times when you have felt your heart changed. Now we are not talking heartburn here, we are talking about times when you have felt your body heavy with challenges. Burdens had overcome you in life and you did not know where to go next. Then something happened and you felt that weight lifted and almost as if you were free from gravity itself.

If you haven’t experienced this then I would encourage you to take some time to talk with me or another trusted spiritual guide, because I believe you are carrying too much around with you and we will talk more about how to let that weight go next week in worship.

John after feeling his weight lifted went and found people were in need of a preacher. A man name George Whitfield had been preaching to crowds of people in the countryside of places like Bristol to hundreds of people. Sharing the news that even if they felt downtrodden God loved them first. It was Whitfield who handed John the reigns of a growing movement that needed structure in order to continue. And John or John Wesley as we know him, the founder of the Methodist movement, the one who had failed because his structures of demanding people worship 5 times a day and had lost him the love of his life would be what was needed.

Remember, at this time in England the debtors prisons had been shut down. People were finding more work with the industrial revolution, but social structures and support were still lacking. Men were spending whole paychecks on alcohol and domestic violence was rampant in the society of the day. John was asked by Whitfield to preach to crowds of people who were thankful to hear a message that despite their failure, God could still love them and transform their lives. John says this about the task of preaching in the fields:

"It is no marvel that the devil does not love field preaching! Neither do I; I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit. But where is my zeal if I do not trample all these underfoot in order to save one more soul?" - John Wesley

Remember Wesley went to fields to share God's grace because people like him and George Whitfield were being turned away from the churches for being too animated and excited in the church.

In Wesley's heart I believe he knew from his experience that God could transform through love, known as grace:

"Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences." - John Wesley

John Wesley seemed to trust that God's transforming love might change the world by uniting humanity, the children of God in common purpose to do God's will. See Wesley's experience of failure had taught him that prior to his failure he had known God was gracious in his head, but not in his heart. He knew that people would have to be transformed from the inside out to feel God's presence radiating out of them.

You see in 18<sup>th</sup> century England there was a belief that Jesus only died for a certain group of predestined people. Only a small group "the elect" had Christ saved and the vast majority were the damned, and that most could not even respond to the grace of God. Wesley found in his experience of God that Grace was at work with all people and the atoning work of Christ was for everyone to know they are children of God, and become one with God a God of pure infinite life giving love.

20<sup>th</sup> century Christian thinker Paul Tillich, says this about the experience of Grace that aligns almost perfectly with John Wesley's experience.

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!” If that happens to us, we experience grace.<sup>2</sup>

Grace is a love that reminds us that we need not be perfect, or put together to feel God’s love. That God’s love is in the hard spaces we enter before we get there, God is by your side when you are in despair, and God’s love envelops you each moment like the air your breath. And that just like air you have to choose to really accept it in for it to permeate your very being.

I share this story with you as one last bowling ball example of grace:

The new lake by Margaret Silf

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Tillich - *The Shaking of the Foundation*

<http://www.zengestrom.com/blog/2010/03/tillich-on-grace.html>

It was springtime on the mountain. The fresh spring flowers were just beginning to sprout and show their colours. The birds were gathering building material for their nests. But all was not joy and happiness on the mountain. Over the wintertime there had been landslides, and the terrain had changed. In one place there was a cavernous hole where a rockslide had dislodged a group of large boulders. Nothing was growing in this empty hollow. An air of sadness and failure filled it. It felt like nothing.

But one day the spring rains came. The streams and rivers ran high. The birds took shelter wherever they could find it. But the hole in the mountain could do nothing to protect herself. The water coursed down the mountainside and the rain flooded. She could do nothing but let it all happen.

But when the rains abated, and the summer sun broke through, the flowers gasped. There in their midst was a beautiful mountain lake where the bare hole had been. And the birds swooped down to drink deeply from her fresh waters. And fish took up residence in her clear pools. And the sun made her waters sparkle and painted a reflection of the mountain peaks in her depths. The lake was overjoyed at her transformation.

And, as summer progressed, people came to the valley to admire the new lake and to hike in the mountains. And among them was a hiker who was feeling rather like the lake had felt when she was just a bare hole where nothing grew. When he reached the lake he stopped for a very long time, gazing into her depths.

“This lake is here because the waters found an empty space where they could gather,” he thought to himself. “Last year



she was just a hole in the ground. Now she is brimming over with life and joy. Could it be so for a human heart, I wonder? Could the flow of transforming grace seek out the empty spaces in my life? Could the deep dark hollow of my loss and disappointment become the very space where new life finds entry?"

And the hiker went on his way with a new possibility in his heart and a lighter spring to his step. <sup>3</sup>

On the front of your GPS today is a series of questions. I invite you to take these as you go from here. Use them as your tool this month to mark down where you see God's grace happening around you. Take note of God's grace in your life and recognize it for what it is. Love given life and giving life to each of us. Share these grace sightings in prayer the next few weeks in your families, friend groups and in church with each other. Help us each take note of God's love in our lives, so we might learn to share it in others' lives.

Shalom and Grace on your journey.

Amen

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<sup>3</sup> Silf, Margaret. One Hundred More Wisdom Stories (pp. 133-134). Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.

