

The Anthropology of Grace

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On May 24, 1738, 277 years ago today, John Wesley wrote this in his diary:

“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”

“I felt my heart strangely warmed,” the turning point for John Wesley from trying to earn his salvation through good works of all kinds – praying at 5 o’clock in the morning, reading the scriptures religiously, meeting with fellow Christians, visiting the inmates in the prison, to realizing that he was already saved through the love of God in Jesus Christ, a sheer gift for which he need do nothing but accept it. And then, upon accepting God’s love, he would be inspired to perform the same good works as before, and even more, but now not to earn salvation but instead as a means of thanking God.

We cannot earn God’s love because God already loves us. So, all of the good we do in the world is not to win points in heaven, but to thank God for loving us. Through our actions in the world others may find God’s love for themselves.

“I felt my heart strangely warmed,” the fire of the Holy Spirit within one’s heart, John Wesley’s Aldersgate Experience, a perfect coincidence on this May 24th, since it also is Pentecost Sunday on the Christian calendar. The flame embracing the cross, the symbol of the United Methodist Church, **is** emblematic of this gift from God.

And from May 24, 1738, forward John Wesley, and his brother, Charles, carried this message of God’s grace to all the people of the realm, John traveling 250,000 miles on horseback to preach and organize “Methodists” as a renewal force within the Church of England, Charles as a poet staying home and writing hymn texts. Someone has counted 6500 hymns written by Charles; 5500 are judged not to be very good. But 1000 is not a bad life’s work . . . “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing,” “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today,” “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” . . . Christians all around the world sing these hymns today, all part of the Wesleyan influence.

Today we look at Charles Wesley’s hymns as an expression of the “anthropology of grace,” as the human story of how we experience the love of God in our lives. Using some of his poetry, we see the progression that leads us from prevenient grace, the grace God shines into our lives even before we know it, to repentance, to justifying grace, what God does for us, to rebirth, and finally, to sanctifying grace, what God does through us.

The Wesleyan theology of grace is so egalitarian that it offended the upper class elite of 18th Century England. “It is repulsive to think that a common wretch of the earth could be saved along with me,” one crusty upper crust lady complained. John and Charles’ anthropology of grace was so inclusive that the Anglican Bishop of Bristol refused to appoint John to a parish. That is when Wesley expressed the noble claim, “The world is my parish.” Not only was it a great vision; it also was a necessity, having nowhere else to go but into the open pit mines and village marketplaces.

Prevenient grace . . . God is at work in our lives even before we know it. We see it only when we look back. It is a matter of awakening, of it dawning on us that we are not living as our best selves. The Parable of the Prodigal Son, as we know it, dramatizes this universal human story. The younger son claims his inheritance from his father, goes off to a foreign land, and squanders it all. He is reduced to slopping pigs, dreaming of someday eating as well as they do, when finally he comes to himself, writes Luke. "This is no way for a good Jewish boy to be living." God is at work in him to bring him to this realization.

So, Charles Wesley writes a hymn of invitation, calling us to pay attention to what is going on in our lives.

"Come, sinners, to the gospel feast; let every soul be Jesus' guest;
ye need not one be left behind, for God hath bid all humankind.
Sent by my Lord, on you I call; the invitation is to all.

Come, all the world! Come, sinner, thou! All things in Christ are ready now." (#339)

Repentance. What does the prodigal son do when he sees his desperate situation with new clarity? He turns around and heads back home to his father. "Repentance" simply means to "turn around."

I remember hearing the Rev. James Forbes preach at Riverside Church in New York City about Jesus, in disgust with Peter, his disciple, saying, "Get behind me, Satan!" And then, Forbes twirls around in the pulpit, looks back over his shoulder, and says, "Well, you don't think Satan just meekly tiptoed around behind Jesus and said he was sorry. Jesus turned his back on evil." That is repentance, turning around.

Charles was brutally honest in calling for repentance:

"Sinner, turn: why will you die? God, your maker, asks you why,
God, who did your being give, made you himself, that you might live;
He, the fatal cause demands, asks the work of his own hands.

Why, you thankless creatures, why will you cross his love, and die?

Charles continues to place the call in the voices of the Trinity, and returns to Jesus calling,

"Turn, he cries, ye sinners, turn; by his life your God hath sworn;

He would have you turn and live, he would all the world receive;

He hath brought to all the race full salvation by his grace;

He hath no one soul passed by; why will you resolve to die?" (#346)

Justifying grace. The prodigal son walks the full distance home, all along the way practicing his only plea, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." But before he even gets to the house, the father comes running to him, embraces him, and cries out, "Kill the fatted calf and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Through no doing of his own, the son is unconditionally received with open arms by the father. That is the nature of God's grace to us. We cannot justify ourselves. We cannot plead our own case. And we do not need to. God's love revealed to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is so gracious, so grace-filled, that we are welcomed home, no prerequisites required but only to come to our senses and turn around.

It is amazing, God's amazing grace. We could quote that hymn except that Charles Wesley did not write it. But Charles wrote one not familiar to many American United Methodists but a favorite among British Methodists, a poem of sheer wonder at God's love for us,

"And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood!
Died he for me? Who caused his pain! For me? Who him to death pursued?

Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee. (#363)

The words convey the joy of being justified by grace. There is a plaque on the quadrangle wall of Lincoln College at Oxford University where John Wesley was a teaching fellow for years. For him, how Methodists were to sing his brother's hymns was very important. His words enshrined on the wall of the college: "Let the songs be loud and cheerful, and not chirpings and pulings." No chirping or puling here: "My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee." ("Puling" means "whimpering" or "whining." It is a good word for you to use at the office on Tuesday: "Okay, everybody, let's get back to work, and no puling!")

Rebirth. This is what happens when we are set free by God's gracious love. The prodigal son, the father, and the entire household, but one, celebrate. The young man has a new lease on life. That is common to all Christians; we all are "born again," as the contemporary image puts it. It is not the property of only some who have had a certain ecstatic experience; it belongs to all of us because it is God's gift to all humanity who wishes to accept it.

Charles writes a hymn based on the experience of Jacob wrestling with the angel of the Lord. There is a struggle throughout the darkness of the night with the "traveler unknown," but as day dawns we see who has been with us all along, and it becomes a new day for us.

"'Tis love, 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me, I hear thy whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee, pure Universal Love thou art.
To me, to all, thy mercies move; thy nature and thy name is Love. (#386)

Sanctifying grace. Now we come, not simply to the end of the progression – prevenient grace, repentance, justifying grace, rebirth, and now sanctifying grace, but to the purpose of our lives. The anthropology of grace brings us to holy living, or perhaps a more approachable translation, that of experiencing a "happy life." A life lived fully in appreciation of God's grace is a life of both personal piety and social responsibility. Not one or the other, but both. We are called to live a life of inward virtue and of outward good. That is the steady state of a Wesleyan sense of a full and happy life, at peace with God and in harmony with one another. While justifying grace is what God does for us, sanctifying grace is what God does through us.

Charles Wesley's poem about personal holiness:

"O that in me the sacred fire might now begin to glow;
burn up the dross of base desire and make the mountains flow!
Refining fire, go through my heart, illuminate my soul;

scatter thy life through every part and sanctify the whole. (#422)

And then, to complement the personal holiness with social holiness:

"Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go, my daily labor to pursue;
Thee, only thee, resolved to know in all I think or speak or do.
The task thy wisdom hath assigned, O let me cheerfully fulfill;
In all my works thy presence find, and prove thy good and perfect will. (#438)

Notice that we can no longer refer to the Parable of the Prodigal Son when we get to the ultimate stage of God's grace. The gospel story is not complete. We do not know how the younger

son lives his life back home, and we only now are introduced to the older son, who is deeply offended by all of the fuss made over the return of his brother.

Likewise, our story is not complete. How we live this day and tomorrow will tell how warm our hearts are with the love of God and of what good that is to others. Amen.