

Beloved Community

Each individual and community that says yes to God is engaged in this lifelong process of sanctification. It is critical, however, to remember that love exists only in relationship and that we are human—not God. Saying yes does not mean we are perfect or that we will never sin again. To truly grow in grace, to become like Christ, we need to practice; we need reminders; we need to confess our failures and receive forgiveness; we need to celebrate our victories; we need to study; we need to share the gift of love with others in words and actions. Most important we need one another—Christian community that encourages and challenges, that rejoices and weeps together, and that welcomes us in to heal and learn and sends us out to serve and spread the love of God throughout the world.

We are not alone. We are surrounded and embraced by the love of God the Creator; justified through the selfless life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ; made one with Christ and with one another through the persistent, powerful work of the Holy Spirit; called to loving community in our present journey to become Christ in and for the world, and in our future hope of oneness with God.

Learn more about it . . .

To learn more about God's love and the United Methodist understanding of grace, speak to a United Methodist pastor or:

- Go to <http://umc.org>, the official website of The United Methodist Church, for information and links to opportunities to learn, connect, and serve.
- Read *The Wesley Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009) and *Questions and Answers About The United Methodist Church* by Thomas S. McAnally (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), available at 1-800-672-1789, <http://www.cokesbury.com>, or at your local Cokesbury store.



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It's all about

God's Grace



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When we talk about “God’s love,” we are trying to express our understanding of who God is. That’s hard because God *is* love, beyond anything that words can describe. Yet words are the symbols we use to communicate, so we struggle and fumble and use imperfect words to talk about perfection.

Love

God is love, and love can exist only in relationship. This gives us a glimpse of God as the One who cares, who creates, and who seeks to be with the creation.

What is love? First Corinthians 13:4-13 helps define it for us:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. . . . For we know only in part . . . ; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. . . . Then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

This is the love that is God—God’s love—in and for all of creation. God’s love empowers us to be the best people we can be. It freely gives all of itself for our welfare and longs for but does not depend on our love in return. This is love we can count on, no matter what. As Christians, we know the truth of this love that is God through the life, death, and resurrection

of Jesus the Christ. Christ is *Emmanuel*—God with us—in his selfless human life on earth and in the ongoing presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Grace

As United Methodists, we have a rich tradition of language for the love that is God, drawn from Scripture, formed in the writings of John Wesley, and reinterpreted in each generation. Wesley wrote of God’s love as *grace*.

Before we explore his language, however, let’s look at the word *grace*. It is the root for the words *graceful* and *gracious*. When we say people, animals, or things are graceful, we usually mean that they have a gentle, powerful beauty with lines or movement that flow smoothly and easily in the world. When we describe people as gracious, we mean that they are welcoming, kind, patient, warm, and calm in the face of adversity. *Grace* is a word for God’s love that includes all of these qualities: powerful beauty, fluid movement in and through the world, patience with our shortcomings, welcome and kindness when we turn again to God’s calm persistence in seeking us out.

In the language of grace developed by John Wesley, the journey of faith offers us many different ways to experience God’s grace.

Prevenient Grace

First, we believe that God’s grace is fully and freely available to all people. This is *prevenient grace*, the grace that comes before we are even aware that it exists. This is the love of God that called all of creation into being and that continues to reach out in love for relationship with humanity. This is the grace that freely chooses to love us first with no expectation or demand for love in return. This grace cannot be earned or bought. It is God’s free gift of self.

Justifying Grace

In the moment that we become aware of this glorious gift of love, we have the free will (also a gift from God) to choose to accept it or turn away. The awareness may come to us in a blinding flash of insight, or it may grow slowly over many years. It may be in a time of deep joy or deep distress, shame, or guilt that we let down our walls of self-reliance enough to recognize God’s love waiting for us. However it happens, we arrive at the moment of awareness that God loves us, even us, just as we are, broken and imperfect. God loves us so much that God came to be with us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ to show us how to become love. When our eyes are opened to this truth, we have the opportunity to accept the gift of God’s love. And in the very moment that we say yes, we are justified, or set right and made clean. John Wesley spoke of this moment as *justifying grace* because it is God’s unearned love that welcomes us and gives us the faith to say yes.

Sanctifying Grace

Once we have said yes to God’s free gift of love, we are changed for all time. God pursues us through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, working within us as individuals and as the body of Christ to open our hearts to love more, to open our minds to know more of love, and to open our hands to give more and to accept love from others. This is a lifelong relationship of love that fulfills God’s longing for us and deepens our personal and shared hunger for God. Throughout the rest of our lives, the love that is God will work within us through the power of the Holy Spirit, helping us become more like Jesus the Christ. Through this relationship, we are sanctified, or made holy. We are *freed from* slavery to sin (missing the mark) and *freed for* deeper, more powerful love of God and neighbor. This is the ongoing work of *sanctifying grace*.