Previenient Grace

*Please turn to p. 48 in your worship book and join me in the Prayer to the Holy Spirit…*

I don’t know what you may have experienced in childhood. I was blessed to be reared in a Christian home with parents and grandparents who were active in the life of a large, thriving, warm and friendly church. I have many wonderful memories of being at home with my family and feeling at home with my church family as well. I felt completely surrounded by loving, caring people

Things changed during the years when I was involved in two years of Confirmation training, which began when I was twelve. There was a merger that meant that much about our life as a congregation was completely changed. The warm and friendly church of my childhood did not survive those changes. By the time I was in high school and became the president of our YF, I was appalled to sit in church council meetings hearing those people I loved so dearly argue heatedly and even call each other names. Many who did not participate in the arguments sat in paralyzed silence. There was nothing left of the spirit I loved.

Many things happened during that period of time that I could not understand. I was deeply hurt, and eventually left the church altogether. This was facilitated by my going away to college, but I really did leave the church.

I went through years of a pretty dark and confused time. I graduated from high school in 1965. To say that those years of the 60’s and 70’s were filled with turmoil is a gross understatement. We heard things like “God is dead” and “Never trust anyone over 30.” “Down with the Establishment.” In short, everything our parents were taught, that they in turn imparted to us was under attack.

Looking back, I know that I was protected from a lot, but I still think of that time as dark, confusing and filled with fear. Since I had left my church, I was exploring. I was reading about other faiths. In College, one of my roommates was Jewish and the other was Catholic. I had no center and no compass since my support system and base of faith in my home church had eroded so completely. I was in the far country.

It was not until I married a UM Minister and experienced a liturgical dance interpretation of Psalm 139 that I began to come home to God, which began a 10-year process leading up to my Walk to Emmaus experience and my full acceptance of the reality of God’s love and care for me.

**My name is Cheryl Evans and the title of this talk is Prevenient Grace.**

Prevenient Grace is a term that comes from John Wesley, who is the father of what we now know as The United Methodist Church. **Pre- means going before; veni means come. Grace is a gift: God’s free gift of love.** So, Prevenient Grace is the grace that goes before us.

**Prevenient Grace means that God is present with us throughout our lives, whether we are aware of it or not.** This grace is at work in us from our conception to our conversion—from the moment we begin to be until the time when we accept for ourselves the relationship God offers us in Christ.

**Prevenient Grace is**

* The grace that comes before any human decision or endeavor; it is at work before we are even aware of it.
* The love of God wooing us
* The will of God drawing us
* The desire of God pursuing us
* The gift of God freeing us
* The activity of God empowering us.

My first experience with the idea of prevenient grace, though I had never heard the term at that point, was the first year I attended West Ohio United Methodist Annual Conference at Lakeside, Ohio. I watched and listened to a dramatic presentation of Psalm 139. I was experiencing a very low time in my life that week. This presentation moved me deeply and I have never forgotten it.

Listen now to Psalm 139:

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.*

*You know when I sit down and when I rise up;*

*You discern my thoughts from far away.*

*You search out my path and my lying down,*

*and are acquainted with all my ways.*

*Even before a word is on my tongue,*

*O Lord, you know it completely.*

*You hem me in, behind and before,*

*and lay your hand upon me.*

*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;*

*it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*Where can I go from your spirit?*

*Or where can I flee from your presence?*

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there;*

*if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

*If I take the wings of the morning*

*and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,*

*even there your hand shall lead me,*

*and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

*If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,*

*and the light around me become night,”*

*even the darkness is not dark to you;*

*the night is as bright as the day,*

*for darkness is as light to you.*

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;*

*You knit me together in my mother’s womb.*

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

*Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.*

*My frame was not hidden from you,*

*when I was being made in secret,*

*intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

*Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.*

*In your book were written*

*all the days that were formed for me,*

*when none of them as yet existed.*

*How weighty to me are your thoughts O God!*

*How vast is the sum of them!*

*I try to count them—they are more than the sand;*

*I come to the end—and I am still with you.*

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;*

*test me and know my thoughts.*

*See if there is any wicked way in me*

*and lead me in the way everlasting.*

The Bible begins with:

* In the beginning God created the world, the cosmos, and all things in it—“*And God saw that it was good*” Genesis 1:1-25

I had no trouble believing that. I loved the creation story depicted in the book of Genesis. I did have trouble seeing myself as a part of that creation.

Scripture tells us:

* God created humankind, both male and female. God declared that they were good and enjoyed the relationship with them. Gen. 2: 4-22, 2:26-31)

Coming out of the confused and mixed messages of the 60’s, I had trouble sorting out all of that as well. I watched my friends abandoning the values of their youth, and I had a few upsetting and confusing experiences myself. It was very hard to find God in the midst of all of that and to find my way to healthy and satisfying relationships.

The message of scripture tells us:

* The bad news of human sin is preceded by the good news of our origin in God.

As I heard and saw Psalm 139 unfold before my eyes, it resonated deep within me as a profound truth. God knew me even before I was born, and God was with me even in the midst of all the darkness and confusion. God had a design and a plan for my life. All I had to do was to follow, and to let that plan unfold.

We are told that:

* God continues to offer us a relationship with him, no matter what we do in life. God is always there, surrounding us and loving us; constantly calling us to come ever closer to the love and life God has designed for us.

I eventually came to see that God had been there, guiding and protecting me, even as I spent those years in the far country. God was surrounding me and loving me and keeping me from the dangers I saw many people experience, and I knew that God had been calling to me constantly to “bring me home” to the relationship and the experience he had planned for my life.

* The nature of that relationship is love. Not love as in “I love ice cream” or “I love my new car”, but a covenant love. A covenant is a binding promise that God makes to each one of us. The covenant is expressed in Deuteronomy 31:16

*The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he*

*will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not*

*be discouraged.*

How can you experience God’s prevenient grace?

* Examine the events of your life, both positive and negative. As you look back, see if you don’t see the hand of God there in your life. God comes to us through all that we experience, even through all the things we would rather not experience in life.

There were many things that I experienced that I would never have chosen. As I look back, I can see that God was there when I needed strength,

God was there when I needed encouragement and comfort, and God was there when I was in dangerous territory and needed protection.

* God is there through the care and sacrifice of others who embody God’s love toward us.

Sometimes this comes through unexpected circumstances and situations. We often expect that love and care to come through certain people: our parents, our spouses, our friends, church members and others who surround us in our lives. Sometimes we are disappointed when they are not there as we would like them to be. Sometimes we are deeply hurt when the encouragement and comfort does not come as we expect. Sometimes our hurt and our anger prevents us from seeing the other places where God is trying to get our attention and pour out the grace that we need. I have a friend who experienced a horrific tragedy in her life. She had gone to visit her family to spread the joyful news that she was pregnant with their second child. On the return trip, in one horrible moment her life changed forever. They were hit by another car in a head-on collision. Her husband was killed instantly, and her baby daughter, who was in her car seat in the back seat also died. Paula D’Arcy survived, as did her unborn child—but she was flung into a dark space that I can’t even begin to imagine. She has written two books about her experiences and she has been a frequent speaker through the Norman Vincent Peale Ministry and through Guideposts. The books are: *Song for Sarah,* and *The Song of the Redbird.* I thought of the second as I was preparing for this talk, because it describes how Paula found healing as she opened herself up to seeing where God was in her life, providing comfort and guidance where she needed it. It was there all along, but her pain blinded her to that presence for a long time. Others were there surrounding her with their care and with their prayers. I am sure that played a significant role in her healing, even though I am sure that those others also had to draw on God’s comfort and encouragement through the months and years of Paula’s dark time. There were times when I am sure they wondered if she were going to make it.

* God is there through the body of believers in the church.

This was certainly demonstrated in the ways Paula’s family and her church family ministered to her. I found healing in the way my home church family ministered to me through the deaths of both my parents. If you have not experienced the caring of the body of believers, I would encourage you to find a church fellowship that will meet that need in your life.

* God is there through the Holy Spirit awakening our conscience and convincing us that we can never reform ourselves or earn a place in God’s family.

That means that “Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” is not really possible. Think about that expression for a minute. It doesn’t even make sense! Because we are human and fall short of perfection constantly, there is no way we can EARN that place in God’s family. That’s why it is called GRACE. Remember, Grace=gift! And a gift is free.

* God is there through the Holy Spirit, who is constantly courting us, calling us to a life lived in God’s love. Because this is a gift of love and a gift of grace, the Holy Spirit will never force us.

Each person needs to be open to see where that Spirit is active in their live. The question is only whether or not we are willing to see that.

In 1984, I was sitting where you are, on my Walk to Emmaus. I was dropped off in an unfamiliar place, and I only previously knew two women. Because they were also pastors’ wives, I could not reveal that I knew them, because that would “blow our cover.” During that weekend, I realized that I had completely lost myself in my roles as wife, mother and pastor’s wife. If you had asked me where I wanted to go to lunch, I could not have answered that question. It was “whatever anyone else wanted, or whatever anyone else needed.” I was drained of all energy.

This is where I was introduced to the concept of God’s Prevenient Grace, and was when I looked back over my life and could see God’s hand so strongly at work. I was reintroduced to parts of myself I had completely forgotten that weekend, and I can truly say that this experience saved my life.

After my weekend, I received a letter from my aunt. Now, I had only ever seen a signature or a very brief phrase from this aunt before. She sent cards, but did not write herself, because she did not graduate from high school, and did not write well. In that letter, she told me a story from my childhood. I had a little red scooter. I had also forgotten all about that. (Describe the situation)

She said “ I began praying for you then, and I have never stopped praying.”

That’s a perfect example of Prevenient Grace: the prayers of my aunt surrounding me even when I did not know it.

**The critical question for you this weekend is, will you open your heart to God and accept the relationship God offers you through Jesus Christ?**

I can promise you that will be the beginning of great blessing and healing in your life—and may even be the beginning of a great adventure beyond anything you have planned or imagined.

**(Put up final slide)**