**<SLIDE 1><SLIDE 2>PREVENIENT GRACE**

You are a gifted group! I don’t know you personally, but I know you are gifted. God gives us gifts each day, and one of your gifts was an invitation from a friend to attend this weekend. Now, you may not be thinking of the weekend as a gift yet, but you will.

God’s gifts are ***amazing***. And so many come to us without our knowing it. For instance, in my own life one of the gifts I was given early , very early, in life was to be born to Christian parents who brought me to church – this church. It didn’t look like this back then. And it did not always feel like a gift when I was expected to get up every Sunday morning and attend church and Sunday School. And when I was old enough, I attended Youth Fellowship. But it is clear to me now that it was a gift, even though I did not know it then.

We call these gifts Prevenient Grace. This is God’s acting in our lives to bring us into relationship with him even before we are fully aware of God’s presence.

**<SLIDE 3>**My name is **<TRANSITION>**Bill Koppert, and this talk is **<TRANSITION>** Prevenient Grace.

The word Grace comes from the Greek “charis” which means gift

**<SLIDE 4>**

You have heard the word Grace, and you will hear it many times this weekend. **<SLIDE 5>** God’s grace, God’s gifts to you come in many forms, or facets. **<TRANSITION>** Prevenient grace is God’s grace in our lives from the moment of birth to the time in which we accept the gift of God’s love.

**<SLIDE 6>**For you see, God loves us, always has. God is always inviting us into relationship. In Revelation 22:17 we read, ***The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.***

**<TRANSITION>**In the Gospel of John we find that Jesus says it is God who draws us near to him. ***“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.*** ***It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.*** ***No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.*** ***I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.*** (John 6:44 – 47)

**<TRANSITION>**And the Apostle Paul in his letter to Romans tells us that God “pursues” us. Paul says that even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ***But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*** (Romans 5:8)

**<TRANSITION>**

**<TRANSITION>**And Paul in Romans 8 tells us of the freedom we have because of Christ’s love. ***If God is for us, who can be against us?***  . . . ***. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,*** ***neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

**<TRANSITION>**Paul adds in Romans 5:6 that God empowers us. . ***You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.***

All of this, even before we decided anything. God has been there all the time, loving us, gifting us with His presence.

**<SLIDE 7>**

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is Good News. That is what the word Gospel means. But God’s good news doesn’t just start with the New Testament. It begins clear back at the beginning of the Bible, the book of Genesis. In the Creation story, each time God creates, the Bible states, **<TRANSITION>And God saw that it was good**.

Then came the creation of humankind, man and woman.- made in the **<TRANSITION>** **IMAGE of GOD!**  Genesis 1:27 states, ***So God created humankind in his image,     in the image of God he created them;     male and female he created them.***

Think of that! You are created in the image of God, the Creator. God created us in God’s image so that we would be in relationship with Him. God continues to create, in each of us. **<TRANSITION>** You are unique and beloved. The story throughout the Bible is the story of God’s love for the people God has created – you and me.

**<TRANSITION>** This God in whose image we are created is LOVE. Because of that, we can love, and be loved. The letter of 1 John 4:16 states . . ***And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.***

Made in the image of God, you have the capacity within you as a gift from God to love. To love as Jesus loved, without reservation.

**<TRANSITION>** You and I are “wired” to be in relationship with God. That is they way we are put together. Again, this is prevenient Grace. It has been God’s gift to you from the beginning. We are spiritual beings. When Jesus was talking with the Samaritan woman at the well, he said to her***. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.***” John 4:24.

**<TRANSITION>** That is why there has always been a longing within us for a relationship with God. For this we were created. And when we deny it, there is a deep emptiness within us that cannot be filled.

I rejoice that as a pastor I am called to preach this good news. But we know that as human beings we continuously fall short of what we expect even of ourselves. **<SLIDE 8>** Of course, this all began with Adam and Eve **<TRANSITION>** in the Garden of Eden. Their story, and the stories of the Old Testament are filled with countless stories of men and women’s unfaithfulness to God. But, once again, the matter of Prevenient Grace comes into play. Adam and Eve’s choices brought loss and disorder, but **<TRANSITION>** God provided for them. God provided for Noah and his family as well so that there would be a remnant of the righteous. (Genesis 3, 6:1-11)

Like those of old, **<TRANSITION>** we also have a bad habit of making bad choices, and yet God continues to love and provide for us.

**<TRANSITION>** God’s love and grace are always greater than all our sin. God is there before us, providing for us, and leading us.

The amazing thing about God’s prevenient grace **<TRANSITION>** is that God continues not only to offer us a relationship with Him, God continually seeks us out and nudges us in that direction.

That is what our religion is about. Forgive me, I was an English major and I love to explore language. The word religion **<SLIDE 9>** means - **<TRANSITION>** “to connect again”. That is what we are about. To reconnect with our Creator.

But again, I remind you that you don’t have to find God, God has found you and brought you here this weekend. Our God loves you with an everlasting love. **<SLIDE 10>** The prophet Jeremiah put it this way in the Message Translation, ***This is the way God put it: “They found grace out in the desert, these people who survived the killing. Israel, out looking for a place to rest,***  ***met God out looking for them!” God told them, “I’ve never quit loving you and never will. Expect love, love, and more love!***  ***And so now I’ll start over with you and build you up again*** Jeremiah 31:2-4a.

This amazing grace of our God is what is known as **<TRANSITION> covenantal love**. Covenantal love, God love, is the gift of love without any strings attached. God is saying, I will love you, no matter what. **<TRANSITION>** This is the strongest relationship in the Bible. It goes so far beyond what we would call friendship. It is the unending gift of oneself to another.

God made covenant with the families of the Old Testament. God said, I will be your God and will never forsake you. **<TRANSITION>** God made a covenant with Noah and placed the rainbow in the sky as a sign of that covenant. God called Abraham and Sarah from the homeland and promised to be with them always, and to make of their descendants a great nation. God continued to renew the covenant with each generation. When the Hebrew people in Egypt cried out to him, God called Moses to deliver them from bondage and deliver them to the Promised Land. And God renewed that covenant with His servant David.

The History of the Old Testament is filled with the stories of the prophets **<TRANSITION>** calling the people back to this special covenantal relationship with the Creator.

That story shifts dramatically as we enter the New Testament. God, through Jesus, **<TRANSITION>** offers a new relationship of love and grace. God came and dwelt among us in Jesus and showed us the true nature of sacrificial, covenantal love. I will love you always, no strings attached.

**<SLIDE 11>** The Gospel of John tells it this way; ***The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*** John 1:14. This is the Divine Love **<TRANSITION>** of God among us.

And that love is always seeking us***, “God, the Master, says: From now on, I myself am the shepherd. I’m going looking for them. “***  (Ezekiel 34:11, The Message) Jesus becomes that **<TRANSITION>**  seeking love when He encounters Zacchaeus, The story is found in Luke 19:2-10. Jesus sees Zacchaeus up a tree, and invites himself to lunch. Zacchaeus was never the same. After Zacchaeus promised to pay back fourfold all the people he had cheated, ***Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.******For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”***

But it doesn’t stop there. Again, the love of God is everlasting **<TRANSITION>**. And Jesus says that even as we are loved (before we even asked), so are we to love one another***. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*** ***By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*** John 13:34-35

Think about it. Picture it. God loves you unconditionally. After all these years as a follower of Jesus Christ, I still find it hard to understand that God truly loves me, because much of the time I find myself unlovable. But God does love me, and you. The Gospel of John points this out in one of the best known verses of the New Testament, **<TRANSITION>** John 3:16***, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.***

Remember the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden after they ate the fruit? What did they do? First of all they noticed they were naked. Then they hid. And God called out to them, ***Where are you?*** God knew what they had done, and God knew where they were, but God called out to them. God engaged them in conversation. This is prevenient grace. And as we listen to God’s call, and enter into the conversation, we will find healing for our brokenness, and restoration from our alienation. ***For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*** (Romans 5:10)

The story of the Prodigal Son is a story of reconciliation. The Father never stops loving his son. He runs to meet him and throws an extravagant party to celebrate his homecoming. So our heavenly Father seeks us and is ready to throw a party. He seeks us even this day, this hour.

**<SLIDE 12>** So how do we experience this Prevenient Grace?

First of all, it is all around you. **<TRANSITION>** The events of our life, both positive, and negative, can contain the signs of God’s gifts. We think it is in the high moments of life that we will find God, but in my experience, it is more often in the midst of my pain. Pain has a wonderful way of bringing you to the full realization of my need for God. It brings me to my knees. Can you think of the painful moments of your life? Where was God in the midst of them?

I also find God’s prevenient Grace in the **<TRANSITION>** care and sacrifice of others. I have had the privilege of finding the saints in each of the churches I have been called to serve. These are the ones who work tirelessly, often in the background, and are always keeping us in prayer. Do you know those who pray for you?

God’s prevenient grace is found in the **<TRANSITION>** Body of believers, the church. There are many members of that body who are serving you, praying for you, and watching over you on this weekend. And you won’t even know of most of them.

God’s prevenient Grace is found within us, as the Holy Spirit **<TRANSITION>** works in us to awaken us to God’s loving presence. **<TRANSITION>**

And God’s prevenient grace will be found **<TRANSITION>** through us to others as we pray for one another, witness of the joy of God’s presence, and serve one another in love.

So…. As we consider this matter of God’s Prevenient Grace that has preceded us to this weekend, the **<SLIDE 13>** critical question for us is:

**<TRANSITION>** Will we be open to God?

**<TRANSITION>** Will we accept that relationship that God offers to us through Jesus Christ?

**<SLIDE 14>** DECOLORES!!!