Sanctifying Grace

**<SLIDE 1><SLIDE 2>**Please turn to page 48 in your Worshipbook and join me in the Prayer to the Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in **us** the fire of your love. Send forth Your Spirit and **we** shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy Your consolations. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**<SLIDE 3> My name is <TRANSITION> Cheryl Evans, and the title of this talk is <TRANSITION> SANCTIFYING GRACE.**

My family had a plan. My paternal grandparents were denied their education because of family circumstances that meant they had to shoulder adult responsibilities while they were still children. Education was vitally important to them. It was a proud day when their oldest daughter went away to begin college at Ohio University. A few months later, the stock market crash happened, and the country went into The Great Depression. Somehow, she and the family held on by whatever means necessary, and she was able to graduate. Then, the mantra became, “If she can do it, you can do it.” So, I was going to college. Anything else would have meant a failure and a disappointment to the family that I did not want to experience.

**<SLIDE 4>** According to my family, the best thing was to follow the model of my aunts, so their plan became my plan. I was going to be a teacher. I read a “bumper-sticker-like” statement once that says: “If you want to make God laugh, tell him YOUR plans.” It is a longer story than I can tell you today, but let me say that my plans definitely did not work. Oh, I became a teacher all right…but the difficulties, obstacles and hindrances that happened to me would fill several books, and I think rumor has it that you are planning to go home sometime today.

You have been learning a lot about grace this weekend. You know by now **that <SLIDE 5> the grace of God** is experienced in many ways as we continue on our spiritual journey, and I hope you have heard that it IS a journey. You have learned that **<TRANSITION> Prevenient Grace** is God’s activity from the moment of our conception to the moment we say yes to God, and beyond. You have learned that **<TRANSITION> Justifying Grace** is the gift of God which gives us the power to accept for ourselves the relationship God offers to us through Christ. You have learned about the **<TRANSITION> Means of Grace** that help us to celebrate and to strengthen our relationship with God. And you have learned about the **<TRANSITION> Obstacles to Grace**, which can consist of attitudes and actions that hinder our relationship with God and with our neighbor. As I learned about the Obstacles over and over during my years of involvement with Emmaus and the UM church, it finally dawned on me one day that **<TRANSITION> an obstacle by definition can be overcome**. (repeat) I have found that insight very helpful as I have confronted my own obstacles. We must remember that through the cross, Jesus Christ has over come every obstacle and stands ready to assist us as we overcome ours.

I want to tell you a bit about my mother’s side of my family. My father was dying of cancer, and my mother and I were caring for him at home. Every Sunday afternoon, someone would appear at the front door for a visit. Sometimes there would be several people. I would usually answer the door. Often, before I could even say hello, I would hear: “You don’t know who I am, do you?” Or they would ask “Do you know who I am?” Sometimes, I would know. Sometimes I wouldn’t. If I said: “I’m sorry, I don’t know who you are.” The response would inevitably be “I’m your mother’s cousin.”

**<SLIDE 6>**  One Sunday afternoon after a visit or two, we were all sitting at the kitchen table eating dinner. We were talking about this phenomenon, and my father finally said to my mother “Just how many cousins do you have anyway?” My mother began counting them off on her fingers, adding them up as she went. My mother had 63 FIRST cousins! We stopped trying to count at that point. The Good Lord knows how many more cousins there are.

My mother came from across the river from Portsmouth, Ohio; over Morton Hill, where there was a lovely farm nestled against the hills of Maloneton, Kentucky. Every single little Protestant denomination known to man was represented in her family circle. Most of those little Kentucky churches believed that if you went to the altar ONCE, that was it. You were saved. I had a bit of a problem with that when I saw some of the behavior that was being excused by that belief.

John Wesley came to a far different belief: the belief in the process he came to call Sanctifying Grace. **<SLIDE 7> Sanctifying grace is the gift of God that provides us with the desire and the power to continue to grow in our relationship with God—and that is a process that goes on forever**. (REPEAT)

**<TRANSITION> Physical birth begins the physical process of growth and maturity. Spiritual birth begins the process of spiritual growth towards spiritual maturity. (Repeat)**

I can explain it best through this poem entitled *Rebirth:*

*“You must be born again.” “How can that be?”Nicodemus said*

*“Can a man return to his mother’s womb a second time to be born again?”*

*The Master smiled. He let him find the answer for himself.*

*Birth of body: tiny, dependent, vulnerable, strong.*

*New life pushed forth from darkness into light: a different state of being.*

*Birth of soul: New life pushed forth by what?*

*The Spirit’s Power. “Unless he be born of the Spirit…”*

*Spun free of all that binds. Pushed to eternity, To live life Alive!”*

**<SLIDE 8> Sanctifying grace is the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit working in and through the heart and life of every believer**. This means that Grace is God’s active love—toward even me.

I am a person who has a hard time feeling loved. I figure that is partly because the two parts of my family were at such odds. The German side were called “Kraut” by my Hillbilly side, and the Hillbilly side were called…well, Hillbillies! I was also an adventurous and slightly rebellious child. I had a real zest for life. This was accepted by my mother’s side of the family. There I could swing as high as I wanted, climb the highest trees, ride the horses and explore varied terrain. I was happiest in this element.

**<SLIDE 9>**  But my mother was an ambitious woman. If you sat her and her sister in the same room, and struck up a conversation, you would not believe that they were so closely related. My mother worked *very* hard to eliminate every trace of her Kentucky accent. She raised me to sit on a satin pillow….well, she tried. Her attempts at control and my exuberance were at odds…and my backside hurts remembering this. The punishments were frequent. I think she thought of parenting the same way her father looked at breaking a horse. I am aware that the way I was raised would be defined by today’s standards as abusive. My mother thought she was doing the right thing.

I just didn’t think that she, or anyone else, loved me. This wound runs deep, even today. But here is where Grace came into my life. My husband and I have attended many spiritual enrichment events. I was attending one such event where folks were to send letters to the participants that would share a memory of a time when the person receiving them would be told what they meant, and would possibly share the way that person had been held up in prayer. These letters were to be a surprise. The greatest thing my husband has ever done for me was to contact the folks he did to send me one of those letters.

The first letter I pulled out of that stack of letters was from my aunt—from my mother’s side of the family. Now you have to understand that this aunt never does anything other than send a card with her signature. I don’t believe that she ever graduated from high school. Her spelling and grammar is so poor that she is ashamed of it. But she wrote that letter and she shared this story:

**<SLIDE 10>**

***Scooter*** Child’s perspective Adult perspective

**<SLIDE 11>**

At that moment, I knew that I was loved, and had a sudden flash of all those other family members who had prayed me through my childhood. I am sure I was protected by those prayers.

At that moment, the awareness of God’s grace came flooding into me, and my mind and my heart were opened in a way they never had been before. Soon after, I reached a point at an Emmaus walk where I could express my thanks to all those who had gone out of their way to make that weekend a meaningful experience for me. The statement I made, and often repeated was that I felt like I was standing at the threshold of something. I didn’t know what lay ahead, but I knew I was being asked to cross over, and I knew that my answer had to be yes.

You know, that happened in 1984. I was on WW #1 in Marysville, Ohio at the table of Joanna. God has taken me on an incredible journey, which continues to this day.

I was “just a pastor’s wife” that day, with four small children. As significant as the roles of wife and mother were and are to me, God was calling me to something different. You have to understand that during my walk I was the one sitting there with my arms firmly crossed over my chest, who did NOT want to talk in front of people. I sat through that weekend doing NEEDLEWORK. Can you imagine? I must have driven my table leaders absolutely NUTS.

I came back for gatherings. I participated in a sharing group. I served on teams, eventually becoming a Lay Director. Then my husband woke up one morning saying “You’ll have to read my sermon.” I took his manuscript to see if I could in any way make it mine, so I wouldn’t just be reading. The response was positive enough that I became a Lay Speaker. Eventually, I was training Lay Speakers, and was led step by step until I became the Deacon in the United Methodist Church and the Family Therapist I am today. If anyone would have suggested that I would do any of these things, I would have laughed…but here I am, a vastly different person than I was then, and I can also truthfully say: God is not finished with me yet.

You may be wondering how you will grow in sanctifying grace as you face the prospect of going back to your homes today. I have no answer for your particular lives, but I sure can say DON’T WORRY. GOD HAS A PLAN!

You will find that this growth in grace is a natural process and will fit your life and your needs perfectly. Jesus used an analogy in **<SLIDE 12> John 15: 1-7** to tell us that a life in grace is as natural as the life of a branch connected to a healthy vine. In that scripture, he explains that **<SLIDE 13>**

* **<TRANSITION> We abide {CLICK TWICE}** in Christ in prayer. Through prayer and worship we open ourselves to God: we become rooted and grounded in love and intimately connected to Christ (**John 15:4**)
* **<TRANSITION> Christ’s word abides in us through study**. On my walk I heard this phrase that has always stayed with me: “God provides food for the birds, but he doesn’t throw it into their nests.” In study we give our minds to God and grow in the mind of Christ (**John 15:7, 10; Phil. 2:5**-8)
* **<TRANSITION> We bear much fruit for God’s glory through action.** In Christian action we give our hands to God and we participate in the work of Christ **(John 15:8**). These works include: works of mercy (providing food, water and clothing. Matt. 25:35; and works of justice (proclaiming release to captives, freedom to the oppressed, and so forth (**Luke 4:18)**
* **<SLIDE 14> We open our hearts to receive grace as a gift.** We do not earn or deserve God’s love; we simply open our hearts to receive it.
* **<TRANSITION> We share grace in the body of Christ.** Through participation in the gathered community and small accountability groups, we receive strength and nurture—just as a branch does from the vine. We come alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:5), learn the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:1-12), and help one another remain rooted and grounded in God’s love (Eph. 3: 14-19, and
* **<TRANSITION> We respond by full participation in the mission of Christ in the world.**

For three days we have prayed for the Holy Spirit to come and fill us with the fire of love. We have learned that:

* 1. God wants a relationship with us even more than we want a relationship with God
  2. God’s role in sanctifying grace is to fill us with the Holy Spirit and fire. Our role is to open our hearts and walk in the Spirit with Christ day by day.

I reached a difficult point in my life journey, before I had any idea that God was calling to me. I was in deep despair, very lonely and confused. I saw a dramatized presentation of Psalm 139 in a large auditorium that spoke to me in such a way that it has become my favorite passage of scripture.

I will end with this, and pray that you might be encouraged as you enter the next steps of your spiritual journey.

**<SLIDE 15>** Psalm 139

**<SLIDE 16>**

Please take advantage of the support systems that are built into this Walk to Emmaus Community, and please, enjoy the trip!

**<SLIDE 17> *De Colores!***