4-6/7-19 Sanctifying Grace Rev. Amy Haines

Is 43:16–21, Phil 3:4b–14 Lent

..It has been said that *anyone* can master *anything,* given 10,000 hours of deliberate practice.

“Deliberate practice” does not mean a few hours a day of half-hearted plunking on a piano

will make you an expert concert pianist any more than playing around on the monkey bars

would make you an Olympic gymnast. Deliberate practice requires total, whole-bodied, whole-hearted focus and devotion. It is the kind of practice for something that you would feel incomplete without; something that finds an echo in your very bones; something that becomes like muscle memory; something that feels like coming home.

 -adapted from -Todd and Jennifer Pick “Making a New Thing” 4-7-19 umcdiscipleship.org

Imagine the thousands of hours of deliberate practice by college athletes who are in the NCAA final four basketball games this weekend. Shots taken, missed, and tried again in practice. Drills run over and over and over again on offense and defense. Learning to trust teammates. Learning to play as a team.

In the Women’s Final Four on Friday night, I could tell that Oregon spends many hours of deliberate practice on 3 point shots, whereas Baylor spends more of their time on shots are in the paint. Notre Dame’s Brianna Turner has perfected the blocked shot, and her final block now has Connecticut’s seniors turning their attention to something other than college basketball.

Closer to home this weekend is the Winterguard World Championships held at UD Arena.

Imagine the hours of practice and intense focus that have gone into each one of those winterguard shows. Learning to twirl flags in unison. Learning to catch rifles at the appropriate times. Learning to tell a story to the crowd through actions and facial reflections. Practicing over and over and over again until that show becomes a part of who they are.

Today we conclude our Lenten series on grace. For five weeks we have been focusing on the gift of God’s grace in our lives, God’s unconditional love for us. My hope is that the more we ponder grace in this season of Lent, the more we are able to recognize that God’s grace is always with us. And the more we are able to recognize God’s grace, the more we are able to practice our response of faith until it becomes second nature for us.

As United Methodists who follow in the footsteps of John Wesley, grace is a central component of our faith journey, as we believe God’s grace is present throughout our lives, a grace that never stops reaching out to us in unconditional love.

John Wesley called this his “Scripture way of salvation.” The grace of God that is active before we are ever aware of it, leads us to faith in Jesus, then encourages us to grow in faith throughout the rest of our earthly lives.

We began this Lenten journey of grace by giving thanks for God’s prevenient grace, the grace that comes before we are ever aware of God. Before we know God’s name, before we know anything about Jesus, God loves us. Prevenient grace is the good news that God loves us no matter what, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.

God’s prevenient grace leads to God’s justifying grace, when we become aware of God’s love for us as evidenced in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Such awareness leads us to faith in Jesus, and is shown to us through the forgiveness of our sins and God’s acceptance of us.

When we begin this journey of faith in Jesus, convincing grace turns us away from sin and reconciling grace turns us toward a deeper relationship with God.

As we seek a deeper relationship with God, we then begin a lifelong journey into sanctifying grace. God’s sanctifying grace begins the moment we say yes to Jesus, and guides us throughout the rest of our lives. God’s sanctifying grace is the gift of God’s presence

empowering us to grow more like Christ each and every day. God’s sanctifying grace is what gives us the strength to live holy lives, lives that reflect God’s love in our love of God and love of neighbor.

Some Christians believe that once they say yes to Jesus, once they are freed from sin and assured of their place in heaven, that is the end to the journey of faith. I would argue, however,

that the moment we say yes to Jesus is really the beginning of our journey of faith. For from that moment on we are called to live in response to our salvation. From that moment on we are called to witness through word and action to how Jesus has made a difference in our lives.

From that moment on we are called to be disciples of Jesus, and allow what we learn from Jesus to impact how we live.

God’s sanctifying grace is what empowers us for the journey of following Jesus. God’s sanctifying grace is what guides us to live by faith, to practice holy habits of piety and mercy,

so that each day we live more like Christ in our love of God and love of neighbor. I give thanks for God’s sanctifying grace, for I know that I could not grow in faith without God’s help!

Yet I also recognize that sometimes I don’t want God’s sanctifying grace in my life. For I know that such grace will change me. Like a piano teacher that encourages her students to practice to get better, like a technician that challenges an apprentice to learn the business, like a coach that strives to bring out the best in his players, God desires that we will grow in faith. God yearns for us to be more like Christ today than we were at Easter last year. God yearns for us to be more loving to our neighbor a year from now than we are this year.

Yet how often do we confess that we like holding grudges so that we don’t have to be in relationship with a neighbor, coworker or even family member who gets on our nerves?

How often do we confess that we don’t read our Bibles or don’t pray or don’t worship so that we don’t have to hear God call us to give generously or prioritize our time or step out in faith?

Last week I heard The Rev. Dr. Todd Anderson share a story about one of his seminary classmates, who for six years served a small rural congregation who refused to partake in holy communion because they also refused to grow in faith and forgive one another! Year after year they did not receive the gift of the bread and cup as tangible expressions of God’s grace because they knew that they could not extend such grace to each other!

And yet, God still loved them. God still called out to them. God still extended the invitation of grace to them, an invitation to let go of the past and move forward in faith.

The apostle Paul calls us today to press on to seek “the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus,” knowing Christ “and the power of his resurrection.”

Yet consider what gets in the way of that call in our lives.

Fear. Doubt. Apathy. Failure. Shame. The Past. Even Success. And social standing.

All of these want to hold us back from pressing on in faith. All of these want to hold our feet to the floor or turn us away, in a different direction, rather than push us forward into a deeper relationship with Jesus. We are afraid of the future. We are ashamed of our past. We don’t know how to change our ways. We don’t want to change our ways.

So often it is our past sins and shortcomings that hold us back from pressing on to Jesus,

fearful that we are not good enough for God or fearful that no one will believe that God has somehow changed us.

Sometimes, however, it is our current successes and social standings that hold us back from pressing on to Jesus, as we refuse to move beyond our comfort zones or refuse to see faith as foundational for our lives.

Before the Apostle Paul encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul thought he had it all. He was living the life of a faithful Jew, with a pedigree few could match.

He was circumcised at a week old like all good Jewish sons. He was a pure-blooded Hebrew who could trace his roots through the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Pharisee who obeyed the Law

and sought others to keep the Law without fault. To that end he was also a persecutor of the early Christian church, believing that the followers of Jesus were perverting the Law of Moses.

Paul had lived his life proud of who he was, proud of his strict adherence to the Law and

proud of his persecution of anyone who threatened to taint or change that Law.

When Paul encountered the risen Lord, his life suddenly and totally changed directions. Paul changed from living for himself to living for Christ Jesus. Paul gave up the predictable and prominent lifestyle of a Pharisee in order to become a disciple of Jesus. Having himself persecuted the Christians, he knew the road ahead would not be easy, nor would it be without its own trials and tribulations. Paul realized he was giving up the known for the unknown,

the predictable for the unpredictable, the ways of the Law for the joy of faith. He moved from past certainty to future hope, and never looked back. He allowed God’s sanctifying grace to transform him day by day and admitted it was a lifelong journey to know and be known by Jesus.

The people of Israel in exile struggled to believe that God’s grace still reached out to them.

After all, it was their sin of turning away from God that led to the exile. They were so crushed by guilt and hardship they struggled to imagine how God could still care for them, let alone offer them a new future.

Yet God sent the prophet Isaiah to say, remember the God who saved your ancestors through the Exodus. Remember the God who forgave and restored your ancestors time and again.

Yet forget the past. Let go of your guilt. Let go of your fear. Let go of your uncertainty.

Now is the time to look forward, as God is about to do a new thing. Focus on the God who makes the impossible possible. A remnant will one day return from exile. Jerusalem will one day be restored. One day the messiah will come.

Isaiah did not promise to remove God’s people from the wilderness, or make a way around their hardship and struggle. Instead, Isaiah promised that God was with them in the midst of the exile. And like a river in a desert, God would do a new thing. They, like, Paul, needed to press on, to move forward in faith, to trust in God’s sanctifying grace.

Pastor Craig Barnes reflects on the struggles of our ancestors and recognizes the same struggles in our lives today:

..On the journey of life we hear two voices calling to us from different directions. Not only do the voices want our attention, they want us to move toward them.

One of these voices comes from the painful past. It calls you to turn your head around and keep focused on your failures or sins. “How could you have done that?” the past keeps asking. Or it may preoccupy you with the failures and sins of others who hurt you. Either way, the voice from the past makes it impossible to move ahead because it doesn’t let you even face the future. It doesn’t matter how carefully you analyze your shame, or how long you nurture the hurts you’ve collected, you’ll never have a better past.

The other voice calls out to you from heaven. It invites you to keep moving into the future

because you are not yet home, the place where you can settle down. You’ll know when you get there, because heaven is the place where you are no longer haunted by the voice from the past. In heaven, finally, there is no regret.

In the meantime, as the apostle Paul says, we strain forward to what lies ahead---the heavenly call. That means we have to forgive, forget and turn away from our past failures because that is exactly what God has done. Only when you believe that are you free to move ahead.”

--Craig Barnes, Homiletics Magazine 3-04 p.41

Sanctifying grace is the voice that constantly calls us into the future, into a future of holy living in the here and now, into a lifestyle that grows more like Christ each and every day, into a daily response to God’s grace with our faith.

Sanctifying grace is the voice that calls us to practice looking forward, moving forward, trusting God’s call and obeying God’s guidance. Sanctifying grace is what inspires us to believe in the power of our church’s Breakthrough Prayer, openness to a new season led by God’s Spirit,

letting go of what holds us back as individuals and as a congregation.

Yes, as we press on in faith, sanctifying grace will change us. The more we recognize God’s grace in our lives, the more we are called to respond to such grace. And the way we are called to respond to God’s grace is to grow in our love of God and love of neighbor. This is a natural outcome of growing more like Christ throughout our lives. We will desire to practice holy habits that keep us in love with God. We will desire to love others in response to God’s love for us,

doing no harm and doing good all in the name of Jesus.

Over twenty years ago Osecola McCarthy responded to God’s grace in a mighty way of loving her neighbor.

..This woman who had made her living as a wash woman in the deep south gave $150,000 to the scholarship fund of the University of Southern Mississippi to “help the children.” Over the years she scrimped and saved on her modest income, spending little on herself, trusting in God and the Scriptures, and believing that she was called by God to do something big as a way to share her wealth. Osecola’s action was consistent with her lifetime of pressing toward the goal of faithfully following Christ. --Upper Room Disciplines 2001, p. 101

In what ways are you responding to God’s sanctifying grace in your life? In what ways are you learning how to live more like Christ? Who comes to your mind as an example of a life

transformed by God’s amazing grace?

The more we are able to recognize God’s grace in our lives, the more we are able to practice our response of faith until it becomes second nature for us. Yes, this takes deliberate practice on our part, to intentionally love God and love others. Yes, this journey of faith takes time.

It is a gradual lifelong process to become more like Christ. This journey is less a sprint and more a marathon. Yet step by faithful step, we are called to press on, to more forward, to look ahead,

to grow in faith.

.. To grow in our love for God, we will grow in our understanding of God and the Christian life,

we will grow in our desire to live as God would have us live, and we will grow in our ability to live in that way.

-adapted from Abraham and Watson, Key United Methodist Beliefs p.77-78 Ch 6

Pressing on in faith requires a change in perspective, from seeing through the lens of our selfish desires to seeing through the lens of God’s kingdom desires. Pressing on in faith requires a change in perspective, from being earthly minded to eternity minded. Our actions will follow our perspective. Grace will change us from the inside out.

As we share now in the bread and cup of Holy Communion, as we begin the journey next week of Holy Week, commemorating Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection, may we give thanks for the deep love of God for each and every one of us. God’s love is a love that we cannot earn,

a love that we cannot wish away, a love that continues to reach out to us throughout our lives.

Give thanks for the ongoing grace of God for each and every one of us. Wherever you are on your faith journey this day, from questioning to faithful, know that God still offers you the promise of God’s own presence.

During this final week of Lent and beyond, continue to recognize God’s grace—prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace—calling to you, forgiving you, and empowering you on the journey of faith.

May it be so. Let us pray.

*In the words of John Wesley:*

Holy God whose nature and name is Love:
Seeing there is in Christ Jesus an infinite fullness
of all that we can want or wish
O that we may all receive of his fullness,
grace upon grace;
Grace to pardon our sins and subdue our iniquities;
Grace to justify our persons and to sanctify our souls;
Grace to complete that holy change,
that renewal of our hearts,
whereby we may be transformed
into that blessed image wherein you did create us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.

**-prayer by John Wesley, umcdiscipleship.org**