

**1** Kindness is good. It makes our hearts warm when we see it, and it breaks our hearts when we don't. I'll go out on a limb and say that every single person in this sanctuary is capable of giving kindness, and that we've all received kindness from other people. Sometimes we give kindness to those we love and know well, like when we wash the dishes after a family meal. Sometimes we give "random acts of kindness" to people we've never met, never knowing a thing about them, like paying for the order for the next car in line at the Caribou drive through. Can you think of a time when you experienced kindness recently, either as a giver or a receiver? Did it warm your heart? Did it bring a smile to your face or tears to your eyes? True kindness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and the world is a better place whenever and wherever we make more room for it. But kindness is not the same as grace. So what's the difference?

We'll try to figure that out as we again ask the question, "How can I live to give?" Living to give means cultivating an attitude of the heart that expresses itself as joyful giving. Whether it's the giving of service, sacrifices, hope, worship, or grace, right giving is marked with child-like joy and Christ-like love. As we prepare to consecrate our Live to Give promises to God today, we come at last to that hallmark feature of our faith and life that sets us apart as Christians and, in particular, as United Methodists. Above all, United Methodists are a people of grace.

**2** Have you ever heard the expression, TANSTAFL? It's the acronym for, There Ain't No Such Thing As a Free Lunch. The simplest way to think about grace is that it's receiving something that you didn't earn or deserve. As Christians, grace has the general meaning that none of us deserve the gifts of God that we enjoy in this life and the next: the Holy Spirit that burns in our hearts, guiding, correcting, encouraging, convicting, and comforting us; direct access to God in prayer; the revelation of God in the Bible; the good gifts of our daily bread; the gifts of family, friends, and Christian fellowship.

**3** Grace has the particular meaning that we enjoy a right relationship with God that makes all those gifts possible, as well as the ultimate gift, eternal life in the restored creation, despite the fact that we deserve condemnation. To put an even finer point on this, grace is Jesus; his life, his sacrificial death, and his resurrection. Nothing less than Jesus, the Word of

God made flesh, could have made things right between us- a broken, hurting, sinful people, and God. There is absolutely nothing that any of us can do to stand in the presence of God and be judged “not guilty,” other than to accept through faith in Jesus the pardon God offers us. That’s grace at its Christian baseline, but it goes even further than that, because when we choose Jesus instead of ourselves, God not only pronounces us “not guilty,” God adopts us as God’s daughters and sons, naming us as God’s heirs and lavishing good gifts upon us! No wonder we sing “Amazing Grace!” It’s a simple and yet mind-blowing concept that requires a lifetime to live into.

**4** Okay, this won’t be as long as seven minutes, and it’s more like Confirmation Class than Seminary. John Wesley described grace first as God’s work in the world, not our work. United Methodists believe that God’s grace works in our lives in three essential ways. Prevenient Grace is when God draws us to himself before we can even articulate a thought or desire to do so. Prevenient grace gives all the credit to God for any faith we might have. When I was a teen and a young adult, I mostly ran from God and denied my faith. But a persistent God pursued me and wooed me, bringing me back into faith as an adult with a young family. That’s Prevenient Grace. Can you think of a time that God was at work in your life before you even knew it, caring for you, drawing you closer?

Justifying grace is the forgiveness and restoration we receive from God when we choose to turn away from sin and turn toward God. Sin is what happens when we know that what we’re doing/thinking/saying/or not doing is contrary to the example and teaching of Jesus. We often become aware that we’re sinning because of that nudge from the Holy Spirit that warns us. Justifying grace is undeserved forgiveness because none of us can fully turn away from sin without God’s help. For most of us, this isn’t a one-time event. The Christian life is often marked by falls and getting back up, sin and turning away from sin, what we call “repentance.” God restores us from our falls, and that’s Justifying Grace.

Sanctifying Grace is everything beyond that. God works in our lives to shape us ever more fully into the image of Jesus by changing our attitudes and our actions. You might not think of yourself as holy, but the desire of God is that we all grow in holiness of heart and life. If you’ve chosen to follow Jesus and allow God to change you from the inside out, then God’s Holy Spirit is at work in your life, even today, growing in your heart a greater love of

God and love of God's world. That's Sanctifying Grace.

**5** United Methodists believe that there are things we can do, not to earn grace, but to position ourselves in a way that we're more open to recognize and receive God's grace. We call these "means of grace." Many of these means of grace are the very same things we've been learning and praying about this past month. Some of them may be the very things you've included on your Live to Give Promise cards this morning. As I share some of those means of grace we call "works of piety," ask yourself if and how you're availing yourself of them: Prayer; fasting; reading and meditating on the Bible; worship; sharing our faith with others; Baptism and Holy Communion; meeting with others in small groups for accountability and Bible study.

There are also means of grace that we consider "works of mercy." Which of these are you using to open yourself to more of God's grace?: visiting the sick or imprisoned, feeding the hungry, giving generously to the poor, seeking justice for the oppressed, resisting discrimination, advocating for environmental justice. Of course, these aren't exhaustive lists, and each one of us has unique gifts and callings to offer works of mercy. Acts of kindness could also belong here. Kind attitudes and acts of friendship or generosity could be a means of opening yourself to receiving and sharing more of God's forgiving love. I confess that I've always cringed a little when I hear the phrase "random acts of kindness," because it seems to me that as followers of Christ, it's regular, sustained, and intentional works of mercy that better fit into the "method" of Methodism, that best position us to have a close encounter with the grace of God and witness to the world the life-transforming power of Jesus. As the narrator alluded to in the video, there's a kind of benign, tepid, anonymous way that we sometimes engage others with that somehow isn't the type of kindness that really changes lives.

**6** Which brings us at long last to our second scripture reading, where Peter argues that we should really lean into the way we offer grace to each other. I'm reading from 1 Peter, Chapter 4, verses 8-11 in the Message. **{Read passage}**

Love each other as if your life depended on it! There's nothing tepid about that exhortation! I've seen that kind of grace in this church, when we rush to the side of someone who's hurting. I've seen that kind of grace when we've served hungry people in Minneapolis

at the Wesley Church. What might our world look like if we lived that way 24/7, at home and at work, in our neighborhoods and in our schools?

It might look something like this: Remembering our total dependence on the forgiving grace of Jesus, more of us would reach into the darker corners of our hearts more often, take out those lists of wrongs done to us that we've been keeping, and tear them up- not because we weren't wronged, but because of Jesus. More of us might decide that the thing that's been bothering us about someone else isn't really worth prosecuting with them after all. More of us might begin to see that many of the different ideas and preferences that live in the people sharing this world with us aren't a problem, but a natural expression of the diversity of God's good creation. More of us would accept with a firm conviction that our lives actually do depend on the way we love each other.

We were made to receive and live in God's grace, and there no possible way to really receive God's grace without offering that in turn to others. As the Apostle John put it, "Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."<sup>1</sup> We were made to receive and give grace. How will you grow in grace this week? Do you really understand that your life depends on it?



## *Buffalo United Methodist Church*

*...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!*

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<sup>1</sup> 1John 4:20 NRSV