

Sermon: Methodist DNA: Sanctifying Grace
Text: Philippians 3:12 – 16
Date: August 2, 2009 AM
Place: Jesup First UMC

Gordon and Gail went looking for their first home. And driving through the countryside of New Hampshire, they came across an old farm for sale. Now, at a distance, the property was perfect, but when they got out of the car and started walking around, they began to wonder how in the world they would ever build their dream home on a piece of property like this. I mean, the property was a mess. There were rocks and boulders and tree stumps everywhere. This was definitely going to take a lot of work ... but ... maybe it was worth the effort.

So, they went into town and put a down payment on the land. And within a few weeks, they went to work. On the weekends, they'd drive up to their new place and spend the whole weekend clearing the land. First, they started with the big boulders. That was easy. And then, they went to work on the smaller rocks. Now, that was a little harder. Then, they got down to the pebbles and that was really hard and tedious. But probably, the hardest thing of all was the tree stumps; Gordon and Gail had to spend day after day, digging and chopping and pulling on those stumps. And then, finally, the day came when Gordon and Gail stopped and looked out over their property and smiled the smile of satisfaction, for their property was finally ready to build their dream house on.

We were created by God and for God. Humanity is the only thing in all of creation that was made in the image of God, in purity and holiness. But something

went terribly wrong. He told them: “*You can eat the fruit of any tree in the Garden, but the fruit of the tree in the center of the Garden is mine. You cannot eat it for on the day you eat it, you will surely die.*” And they did. They ate of the fruit and they lost their purity and holiness. And they packed their bags, wrote God a note, and left for the far country.

And they would have stayed gone too, except the Father went looking for them. Paul said: “*God demonstrated His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”ⁱ That’s what John Wesley called Prevenient Grace, the work of God in our lives, calling us, courting us, wooing us to Himself. And so, He found them on the slave market, wholly sold out to sin and death, standing there in the midst of their ugliness and surrounded by the stench of their failure and His heart went out to us. We weren’t at all what we were created to be. And so, He asked the slave master: “What’s the price?” And he said: “Oh, my friend, this is really going to cost you. I’m not sure you’re willing to pay the price.”

And so, He turned to His Son and John says: “*He sent His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life.*” And Jesus described His ministry like this: “*The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.*” That’s what John Wesley called Justifying Grace, the work of God on our behalf to buy us off the slave market and reconcile us into a right relationship with Himself.

Now, if that's where the story ended, friends, we would among all the people of the world be most blessed. But when God looked over His new "property", He found a lot of stuff – big boulders, large rocks, and a few tree stumps here and there. And because our lives were so messy and cluttered with things unbecoming to God's children, He went to work, clearing away the big sins and the little sins, removing the strong holds that the devil has in our lives and all the while, making us more and more like Jesus. That's what John Wesley called Sanctifying Grace, the work of God in our lives – after salvation – that molds us and shapes us until we once again reflect the very image of God in purity and holiness.

First, Sanctification is the work of God. The writer of Hebrews prays: "The God of peace make you perfect in every good work to do His will, working in you that which is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ."ⁱⁱ And Paul said: "... Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her to make her holy ... and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain, or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." Sanctification is not something we do. It is something we allow God to do within us; it is grace, the very work of God.

Second, Sanctification is a process. In Philippians 3, Paul writes: It's "not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me ... one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the

goal.”ⁱⁱⁱ There was a sense in which – after all those years of serving Christ and walking with the Lord, Paul was still a Christian under construction. You see, it takes a lot of time and work for God to mold us and shape us. Sanctification is a process.

Third, Sanctification does not mean “absolute perfection.” A sanctified Christian is still and imperfect Christian. We are still imperfect in our knowledge. We don’t know everything. We don’t know everything about God. We don’t know everything about humanity. We don’t know everything about the rest of creation. Our knowledge is imperfect.

We are still imperfect in the sense that we make mistakes. Listen, sometimes, in spite of the purest of intentions, things don’t go the way we plan. Even the most holy among us do things that just don’t work out.

We are still imperfect in infirmities. Even sanctified people still suffer sickness and disease. The physical body dies; it wears out and gets old and no amount of holiness will stop that progression.

So, we need to understand that sanctification is not absolute perfection.

Fourth, Sanctification is perfection in love. In his tract on Entire Sanctification, John Wesley said, sanctification is found in this: You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and you will love your neighbor as yourself. Here’s what the Apostle John said: “And as we live with Christ, our love grows more perfect and complete.” John seems to say that as we grow in Christ, our love for God and our love for others gets better and better, fuller and deeper.

And so, holiness is: loving God so much that we don't want to do anything that would break His heart and cause Him pain. It is: loving our neighbors so much that we wouldn't do anything to cause them harm, in thought, word, or deed. So sanctification is really the fulfillment of The General Rules: Do no harm; Do Good; and Stay in love with God.

Now, do we still have the ability to sin? Yes! And I John 1:8 says: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." So, we still have the ability to sin, but the idea is that the deeper we grow with God, the stronger our faith becomes, and the more resistant to sin – willful and habitual sin – we become. That's why John writes: "Little children, I write these things to you so that you will not sin."^{iv}

Sanctification is perfect love, loving God and loving our neighbor.

You know, when you and I come to the altar for Holy Communion, it's a great time for us to do some self-evaluation, some soul searching if you will. Now, if you're like me and Gordon and Gail, from a distance your life looks pretty good. It's only when you get a little closer that you begin to notice all the boulders and stones and stumps laying around. But friends, there is One ... there is One who is working in our lives, clearing away the boulders, removing the stones, and digging up the stumps, making us pure and holy. Now, that's Sanctifying Grace. "This is the will of God: your sanctification."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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- i Romans 5:8
 - ii Hebrews 13:20
 - iii Philippians 3:12 – 14
 - iv I John 2:1