

Good Morning,

June 7, 2015

Many of you know that the week before last I attended the Minnesota Annual Conference in St. Cloud. At this year's conference, one of the presenters was a Pastor Jorge Acevedo of the Grace Church in Southwest Florida. During one of Pastor Jorge's presentations he talked about one of John Wesley's most important teachings, "Prevenient Grace". Now if some of you are like me, I often struggle with my understanding of "Prevenient Grace". I can think about its simple definition of being a special kind of grace that God gives to us before we know and understand the gift of God's grace in our lives. So how many of you are finding yourselves a bit confused over what I just tried to explain to you about Prevenient Grace? Well believe it or not I'm just as confused as you might be and I'm the person trying to explain it to you this morning. So, since I'm recognizing how difficult it is to explain what prevenient grace is to you this morning, I have decided to re-visit an excerpt from a message I presented last year. Now wait a minute, I realize that some of you may be thinking, "So why is Pastor Ron trying to tell us about prevenient grace again since he already told us about it last year?" Well there's a simple answer to our question, you see what I told you about prevenient grace last year was good but what I am going to tell you about prevenient grace today is a whole lot better. But before I get into today's further understanding of prevenient grace here is what we learned about prevenient grace last August. Our August message began; **In 1986, when Jan and I moved to this region of Southeast Minnesota, we discovered one of the most beautiful sights in all of the United States. As we dropped down in elevation from the ridge tops of the original drainage basin of the glaciers we entered an array of low lying clouds that were moving across the waters of the Mississippi River like a flag waving in the wind. It was hard to see the river at times but every once in a while a glimpse of the black water would find its way through the lower edge of the fog to let us know that the mighty river was still there. Seeing the flowing river from time to time was the only thing that would be visible in this dense gray world of fog. And being engulfed by this fog gave us the feeling of only being in the clouds, as all else was gone. But all of a sudden the wind would blow away the fog like a curtain being opened and a beautiful vista of the river valley would suddenly appear in all its creative color and wonder. For us to suddenly transition from being completely surrounded by a dense fog to a panoramic rainbow of color was a feeling that did not need words to explain as it was felt in our souls. For some of us who may have traveled on or alongside the Mississippi River and experienced the suddenness of dense fog, may know of the fear and danger that is suddenly realized when we find ourselves lost in the fog and not able to see our way. As we maintain this mental image of being lost in the fog let us now think of**

Adam and Eve as they left the Garden of Eden. When God cast Adam and Eve from the garden they became lost in sin and they lost their way. Adam and Eve's fallen and sinful nature was keeping them from finding their way in the same way as the river valley fog keeps us from finding our way. You see God loves us so much that he is very concerned when we are lost and cannot find our way because of our sinful nature. God also realizes that with our sinful nature we are going to experience sinful hearts which will lead to sinful decisions, which will lead to a sinful life instead of a life in relationship with God. God created us with the ability of "free will" to be able to choose freely between right and wrong but now with our fallen and sinful nature we are no longer able to choose right from wrong. So God with His unconditional love, gave to us a gift, a gift that we are not able to earn by deeds or works, a gift so amazing that we are not even aware of its presence, a gift that removes our powerful sinful nature thus allowing us to receive God's blessing of "free will". And with this newfound blessing of "free will" we are now able to choose right from wrong. As United Methodists, we have come to know this gift as the gift of Prevenient Grace. You see prevenient grace is the very first grace that we receive before all other graces. And it is the Grace that allows us to clear away the fog of distortion and provide us an opportunity to use our God given Free Will for making our decisions. Simply put Prevenient Grace allows us to see thru our fallen nature just like seeing through a dense fog to the beautiful flowing river below. So now with this image of being able to see through the dense fog of our sins we may be able to understand John Wesley's original description of prevenient grace a bit easier; *"The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preceding us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will."* Thus, prevenient grace is the concept that man is too corrupt to be saved, so God in His mercy give men grace so that they can make the choice to be saved." So, it was with this John Wesley's description of prevenient grace that we were left with last August. And it was up to this point that we had learned that prevenient grace was the grace that allowed us the ability to get beyond our sinful nature. And by being able to get beyond our sinful nature we are able to make free-will decisions to turn our lives over to God's loving care. So now that we have arrived back to our message today, I would like to proceed with a story about a boy with an unchangeable faith. *"A boy was sitting on a park bench with one hand resting on an open Bible. He was loudly exclaiming his praise to God. "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! God is great!" he yelled without worrying whether anyone heard him or not. Along came a man who had recently completed some studies at a local*

*university. Feeling himself very enlightened in the ways of truth and very eager to show this enlightenment, he asked the boy about the source of his joy. The boy replied with a bright laugh, "Don't you have any idea what God is able to do? I just read that God opened up the waves of the Red Sea and led the whole nation of Israel right through the middle." The enlightened man laughed lightly, sat down next to the boy, and began to try to open his eyes to the "realities" behind the miracles of the Bible. "That can all be very easily explained. Modern scholarship has shown that the Red Sea in that area was only 10-inches deep at that time. It was no problem for the Israelites to wade across." The boy was stumped. His eyes wandered from the man back to the Bible lying open in his lap. The man, content that he had enlightened a poor, naive young person to the finer points of scientific insight, turned to go. Scarcely had he taken two steps when the boy began to rejoice and praise louder than before. The man turned to ask the reason for this resumed jubilation. "Wow!" Exclaimed the boy happily, "God is greater than I thought! Not only did He lead the whole nation of Israel through the Red Sea, He topped it off by drowning the whole Egyptian army in 10 inches of water!"*

The boy in this story mentioned two very interesting points, for us this morning, in his conversation with the "so called enlightened man". His first statement for us to think about is, ***"Don't you have any idea what God is able to do?"*** And his second statement is, ***"Wow...God is greater than I thought"***. Let me ask this question, ***"How many times do we maybe find ourselves thinking like the enlightened man and not really seeing what God is capable off in our lives?"*** It's easy to see in our story that the young boys faith is strong enough to even overcome the scientific logic of this world. And it is this logic that will take away our faith too, if we let it. So, how do we go about overcoming these "enlightened scientific thoughts of this world"? Let's look to Matthew 18: 2-4 for the beginning of our answer, ***"And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven..."*** Our story, this morning, obviously reinforces this message to us in that the "enlightened man" is not even close to having the faith that the young boy has. From our verse in Matthew we find the phrase, "unless you are converted". So, how do we go about having our thoughts of this world converted into faithful thoughts of God's Kingdom? It's actually pretty simple; we let God do it for us. Remember God's gift of prevenient grace that we talked about earlier in our message. You know the pre-grace that allows us to shed thoughts of this world by being able to see through our sinful nature enough to understand that "God is Greater than We thought". So in our story this morning it's pretty evident that it's the young boy who had been blessed by God's Grace and not

the “enlightened man”. So does that mean there’s no hope for this “enlightened man”? Actually there is a lot of hope for this “enlightened man” as well as the many others in our world who have not yet come to know God in their lives. And what if I told you that it’s our understanding of “Prevenient Grace” that leads us know of this hope in the world. But what if I still don’t really understand how “Prevenient Grace” works. How am I supposed to know about the hope in this world for those who do not have faith in God yet? Well, thanks to Pastor Jorge’s presentation at the annual conference we’re going to understand “Prevenient Grace” from a different perspective. And with this new perspective we will have a better understanding of hope for so many that have no faith in their lives. And it was something said by Pastor Jorge that led me to understand “Prevenient Grace” from a new angle. And here is what he had to say, **“God is out there at work in the world and has an active presence that’s not dependent on human actions—a concept Methodism founder John Wesley called “prevenient grace.”** Pastor Jorge went on to say that ***“people who don’t have faith still love God, they just don’t know it yet”***. And it was this statement that helped me to understand that “Prevenient Grace” was a grace that God has given to each one of us even before we realize our faith in Him. Think of every human being in this world as having God’s loving grace in their hearts, working every day of their lives to bring them into God’s Kingdom. Now that’s hope for all of God’s children that each and every one of us has a built in love for God even if we don’t know it yet. With this new understanding of “Pre-grace” or “Pre-love” as I now like to think of it, it’s easier to see my role as a Christian in bringing hope to non-believers. You see God uses the faithful to help to open up the hearts of those who have no faith. Even the “enlightened ones” who have no idea of how great God is and what He’s really capable of. So now we may understand a bit better that it’s not about if God will love someone but about them opening their hearts to a love that God has already given to them. Sort of like when I first met Jan, she loved me but she just didn’t know it yet. Amen