



# Grace.

## Week 1: Prevenient Grace

Lori Lampert - 04/23/2023

I read a lot. I particularly read a lot of biographies and autobiographies to help me understand human nature. I have plowed through Ron Chernow's biography of Alexander Hamilton twice, before and after I saw the musical. And sometimes as I read, I discover a story so profound that it takes my breath away. Sir Nichols Winton is such a story.

In 1938, on the eve of World War II, Winton, a stockbroker from London in his late 20s, traveled to Czechoslovakia where thousands of Jews were already being persecuted and displaced by the occupying Nazis. Winton had been raised both as a baptized Anglican and the son of German Jews who had emigrated to England at the beginning of the 20th century. Winton compiled a long list of children who needed to be rescued from the impending threat of what we now know as the Holocaust. This is a story of what grace looks like. And as a refresher, here's a great definition of Grace that I love:

**Grace. An act of kindness, an act of selfless love that is completely undeserved and is given without expectation of repayment. We are never more like God than when we are giving selflessly to others.**

Nicholas Winton returned to London and began to work within the existing systems to provide a way for these children to come to England—or any

country that would open their doors. There were so many roadblocks and rules he had to overcome, and in some cases (with the help of a mimeograph machine), change. Winton set up an office in a hotel room, and he began the process of what has become known as the Czech *Kindertransport*.

In order for a child to come to England, there had to be parents willing to let them go. There had to be a home and a sponsor willing to receive them.

There had to be people on the ground in Prague, risking their own lives to get the children on the trains for safe passage through Nazi-occupied territory. The Nazis closed down the transport in September of 1939 with a train full of over 200 children on the track. Only two of those 200 survived the concentration camps.

Winton and his associates had rescued 669 children. How do they know exactly how many and the names of them all? Winton's wife was up in the attic of their home in 1988 (50 years after the fact) and found a scrapbook with meticulous records. She gave this to a holocaust researcher, and that year—after half a century—Winton was invited to a BBC program where, unbeknownst to him, he sat in the audience with dozens of the now adult children he had helped to save and their children and grandchildren. It was only after this show that Winton began to receive the accolades from his act of grace. If you want to know more, there is a documentary called *Into the Arms of Strangers* that you might watch.

Grace. Selfless love given with no expectation of repayment. It is all over this story. The grace of Winton to upend his life for the sake of the children. The grace of the parents of these children to love them enough to let them go. The grace to let their own hearts be broken to protect the vulnerable was profound. There is the grace of hundreds and hundreds of people in Britain to open their hearts and homes to receive these children, raise them, and love them into adulthood. We are never more like God than when we are

conduits of God's grace. Letting it flow in us and through us, changing us and the people we are called to serve.

Grace. In his book *Revive*, Adam Hamilton gives us this description of grace:

**Grace as a quality of God's character whereby God loves, blesses, and forgives humanity despite our sin. Grace as God's active work by the Spirit to draw us to God and to restore us to what God created us to be.**

It is who God is and how God works in us. John Wesley, the founder of what began as a reformation of the Anglican church in the 1700s and became for us United Methodism, described three movements of God's grace in our lives: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying.

**Prevenient Grace: The grace that goes before.** Initiated by God, Wesley explained that God is actively wooing each of us towards salvation in Jesus Christ from the very beginning of our creation. God is always demonstrating God's love and grace towards us.

**Justifying Grace: The grace that brings us to new life in Christ.**

Sometimes called conversion, sometimes called being born again. It is freely given by God for all. It can be freely received or rejected.

**Sanctifying grace: The grace given by God to live a transformed life.** It is a process we enter into and live the rest of our lives as we move to what Wesley called perfection, our ultimate goal on this planet, perfectly loving God and perfectly loving neighbor.

During the next three weeks, we are going to spend some time intentionally exploring the grace of God that is always moving in this world. It is an active gift that God brings to us to call us into relationship, to restore us to who we have been created to be, and to empower us to move forward in love. Today we begin with prevenient grace. God is actively wooing us from the moment of our birth, calling us, inviting us, loving us. All of us.

The story of Holy Scripture, from beginning to end, is the story of God reaching for us. Prevenient grace. It is the story of humanity's fall from grace, our propensity to sin, to take what has been given to us by God, our very lives, and use it for our own gain. And God's great love that reaches into our lives to change us.

God walks in the garden seeking Adam and Eve. God speaks through a burning bush seeking Moses. God calls to humanity through the prophets to warn and bring them back. God becomes incarnate in Jesus, the ultimate experience of prevenient grace, to demonstrate once and for all the depth of grace. God will hold nothing back that we might know God's love.

And there was once a man named Paul who still didn't get it. Educated by the great rabbi Gamaliel, he knew all the stories of God's restoration and persistence in the Hebrew Bible. Let Paul describe himself:

### **Philippians 3**

**<sup>4</sup> If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.**

All of those credentials, and yet, he still didn't get it. So God comes in Jesus Christ, once again. This time on the road to Damascus where a man named Saul begins his journey to become Paul, the great evangelist. I'm reading from the Message:

### **Acts 9**

**<sup>1-2</sup> All this time Saul was breathing down the necks of the Master's disciples, out for the kill. He went to the Chief Priest and got arrest warrants to take to the meeting places in Damascus so that**

**if he found anyone there belonging to the Way, whether men or women, he could arrest them and bring them to Jerusalem.**

**<sup>3-4</sup> He set off. When he got to the outskirts of Damascus, he was suddenly dazed by a blinding flash of light. As he fell to the ground, he heard a voice: "Saul, Saul, why are you out to get me?"**

**<sup>5-6</sup> He said, "Who are you, Master?" "I am Jesus, the One you're hunting down. I want you to get up and enter the city. In the city you'll be told what to do next."**

Can you see the grace in this moment? God's persistence that this person, this one should be restored? Prevenient grace in a voice, in a blinding flash of light. A moment in time that took a person determined to stop the followers of Jesus and called him to give his life for Christ.

And I wonder, did Paul look back and see how God had been moving throughout his life? Did he see that his knowledge of scripture was God calling him to understand the truth of Christ? Did he know that all that he had done, all those he had harmed, all he had persecuted, did not keep Jesus from wanting him, calling him, redeeming him. When he looked back over time did he see the way from the beginning of his life, God had never given up on him? Did he learn of the many who had been praying that he would come to know Jesus. Prevenient grace.

I love what theologian Thomas Merton wrote: **"We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and the divine is shining through it all the time."**

In our United Methodist tradition, we baptize infants and children. It is a sacrament of prevenient grace being enacted. Baptism is recognizing that God is already loving this person, extending grace to this child. Before we can acknowledge the truth of this, before we are even capable of understanding the magnitude of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, God is at work

wooing, calling, persistently engaging with us through the power of the Holy Spirit to know Christ.

Look back over your own life. Look for the ways God was and is working. Maybe not in an audible voice from a flash of light or a burning bush reminding you of God's presence. Take a deep breath. That gift of *life* is God's prevenient grace. The day that dawned this morning was a gift of God's presence. The teachers who educated you, the healthcare providers who took care of you, these are people of God's grace. Those children who just stamped upstairs are God's children, and God is working through the volunteers who will greet them so that they might come to know God's love. When you walk out of the doors this morning you will see trees and flowers blooming. You will hear birds singing that God created. Those are the sights and sounds of prevenient grace.

And I understand that in this fallen world we will see disasters, and hear of violence, and know of unimaginable pain. In this congregation are people who are experiencing challenges and circumstances that could mask grace, hide it from your eyes and cause you to think this is just a pie-in-the-sky approach to life that is not based in reality. Look harder.

God is not giving up on humanity. *Ever*. Do you see God loving us in the people who go to the disaster, bring the food, care for the hurting? Do you see God's grace working in those striving for justice and standing for peace? Do you see God moving in people resolved to bring fresh water to the thirsty and heal the injuries we have inflicted on the environment? God is working through Good Dads to bring families together. To repair damaged relationships. God is working through the Council of Churches to create the synergy among Christ followers to impact our community. God is working through the people of Youth Connect and RareBreed to offer resources and services to vulnerable youth. God is working, always.

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The children rescued through Operation Kindertransport never knew how it happened. They were told by their parents that the train that would take them to the Netherlands, and the boat that would take them to Britain was just for a few weeks. The parents knew they were saying goodbye and entrusting their beloved child to circumstances beyond their control.

The children never heard the name Nicholas Winton until 50 years later when they were contacted about appearing on the BBC show to honor him. Watch the moment when Winton learned who was sitting around him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKkgO06bAZk>

Nicholas Winton's story is extraordinary. But I ask you. What would you be willing to do to be used by God and be part of God's prevenient grace that will save lives now and forever?