

Have you ever thought about why you have chosen this church as your spiritual home? And if you have chosen to officially join this church, have you ever thought about why you have chosen to express your Christianity as a United Methodist?

Today I want to share at least one theological reasons why you may have chosen Methodism to express your faith. It's called Prevenient Grace. Like Eskimos who have many words for snow, Methodists came to have many words for grace. It was so central to the Methodist movement. The Wesleys came eventually to speak of grace in three primary ways related to particular moments in our spiritual journey.: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying or perfecting grace. *Hymnal*.

One of our theological beliefs that sets us apart from some denominations is our understanding of who God is. You can start from the perspective of God is Judge or from the perspective of God is Love. Those who see God as Judge tend to have a faith that is fear based. It starts from the premise that *"You are a worm. You are a sinful creature. You were born sinful, and you will always be sinful."* And that fear permeates your worldview. On the other hand, those who view God as love, ultimately come to God out of love, not fear. It is a theology that says, *"Yes, we are broken creatures living in a broken world, but ultimately we were born of grace, and at our core resides the grace of God."* Those are the two extremes. Ultimately, we worship a God who embodies both characteristics of God as Judge and God as Love.

Methodist theology, as I see it, starts from the standpoint of God is Love, as embodied in our scripture today I John 4:7,8 and in the theology of Prevenient Grace. It means "to come before". It is the grace embodied in Psalm 139. It is the understanding that God's love is present from the beginning of our lives, regardless of any conscious effort on our part to know God. God loved us before we ever loved God. Even though we don't have a conscious memory of it, we experienced God's grace from the moment we were conceived. No one is immune from the impelling, persuading, and enticing nature of God. God reaches out to us accepting us just as we are, drawing and compelling us into relationship, long before we are capable of reaching out to accept God. It might be tempting to think that we chose God first, but God is the one who takes the initiative. John 15:16: *You did not choose me, I chose you, appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.*" God's love is like the Mother Bunny – always searching for us, knowing our inner nature, longing for us to come home. God is always there taking the initiative, tugging at our hearts.

And God sends people to be in relationship with us so we can experience this love. This rings true in the story of some African cultures.

When a woman in a certain African tribe knows she is pregnant, she goes out into the wilderness with a few friends and together they sing, chant, and meditate until they hear the song of the child. They recognize that every soul has its own vibration that expresses its uniqueness in the world. When the women attune to the song, they sing it out loud. Then they return to the tribe and teach it to everyone else.

When the child is born, the community gathers and sings the child's song to them. Later, when the child enters education, the village gathers and chants the child's song. When the child passes through the initiation to adulthood, the people again come together and sing. At the time of marriage, the person again hears their song.

Finally, when the soul is about to pass from this world, the family and friends gather at the person's bed, just as they did at their birth, and they sing their song as a part of "being with" them at the very end.

In this African tribe, there is one other occasion when it is customary for the villagers to gather and sing a person's song to them. If at any time during their life, the person commits a crime or deviant social act, the individual is called to the center of the village and the people in the community form a circle around them. Then they sing that person's song.

The tribe recognizes that the best correction for problematic behavior is often not punishment; it is love and the remembrance of identity. When you recognize your own song being sung by your own community, whatever threat to yourself that may have motivated angry, destructive, or chaotic action is diminished; your identity is reaffirmed and the self regains its cohesiveness; you remember who you are and why you do not wish to cause hurt to members of your own tribe. Those who love you are not fooled by mistakes you have made or dark images you hold about yourself. They remember your beauty when you feel ugly; your wholeness when you are broken; your innocence when you feel guilty; and your purpose when you are confused. This is God's prevenient grace entering in.

But there is a catch with this concept of Prevenient Grace – at some point, we have to choose God back. At some point, Prevenient grace must become saving grace. Just like the Runaway Bunny who spent all his time running away from his mother finally decided he may just as well go home, so too do we have to decide to go home and choose God back. If we're not aware of that initiative, we won't be looking and listening for God. If we're not looking for prevenient grace in our lives, it will just pass us by. Our job is to open our lives and open our hearts to God's love. Our response is to choose back. And that is next week's message – Justifying Grace – choosing God back.