

It was June 2002. I had just graduated from seminary, and I was attending Annual Conference to be commissioned for Probationary Ministry, which would be a three year process before I could be ordained. Parading on to the Bishop's podium with the other candidates, we answered questions before the entire conference. One of the most memorable was: "Are you in debt so as to embarrass yourself or to interfere with your work of ministry?" And the answer is supposed to be, "No, Bishop."

After three years of probationary status, I was recommended for ordination in 2005. Paraded back out onto the Bishop's Podium, we candidates answered a different set of questions. This time it included the historic questions passed down from Wesley's days: "*Are you going on to perfection?*" followed by "*Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?*" The expected answer to both questions is "yes." This question stems from Wesley's concept of "salvation by grace."

The last two weeks we have been looking at our Methodist Theology of Salvation through Grace.

God's action through Prevenient Grace – unconditional love.

The action of Jesus – through Justifying Grace – Redeeming/forgiving grace. We are fully accepted, forgiven reconcile, and restored to the image of God through justifying grace, but this is not the end of God's saving work. Today we look at Sanctifying Grace – Moving on to perfection in love.

Sanctifying Grace is God's grace working in us as we deepen our faith and mature as disciples of Jesus. We are not yet what we shall be – we are constantly becoming. We grow in our knowledge of God and commitment to serve God. We believe that through Sanctifying Grace we are transformed into a greater likeness of Jesus. One of the more controversial teachings of the early Methodist movement was the teaching that it was possible of us to realize Christian perfection in this life, which meant perfect love, having the mind of Christ. The Wesleys taught that as we open our lives to the love of God, it must make us more loving toward others, more loving toward other people. Vertical axis/horizontal axis. This love changes the way we live our lives. Through the Holy Spirit, we manifest our gratitude in our service to God and our neighbor. It asks of us, "Are you part of the healing of the world?"

In a Dennis the Menace cartoon, Dennis and his friend Joey are leaving Mrs. Wilson's house, hands full of cookies. Joey says, "I wonder what we did to deserve this." Dennis answers: "Look Joey, Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we're nice, but because she's nice." We are like those little boys receiving the kindness/generosity of a God who started a good work within us and will be faithful to complete it. And Sanctifying Grace is the action of passing it on to others – paying it forward.

It was out of this understanding of sanctifying grace that Methodism's passionate commitment to mission and social justice emerged. The Wesleys taught that as we open our lives to the love of God, it must make us more loving toward others, more loving toward other people. This love changes the way we live our lives. One of the most controversial teachings of the early Methodist movement was the teaching that it was possible for us to realize Christian perfection in this life, which meant perfect love, loving perfectly. John Wesley emphasized that as we become more and more filled with the love of God, this will lead to acts of mercy and works of justice. The emphasis of Christian life is on sanctification. The goal in the end is Christian perfection, not necessarily to act perfectly but to achieve an inward perfection of intentions and attitudes. For Wesley, inward holiness, activates an outward response to do good works. Wesley's doctrine of holiness as Christian perfection would become the distinctive hallmark of Methodist theology.

So, the Methodist movement poured itself out to the poor. It operated soup kitchens, literacy programs teaching people how to read. It made loans to help people to start their own businesses. It is no accident that in England the labor movement grew out of Methodism. Almost all of the first, early labor unions were Methodists who believed that justice for people and for workers was a part of what it meant to be perfect in love. The early Methodist movement opposed slavery. It opposed governmental policies that kept poor people poor. And on Memorial Day weekend, when we remember and honor the lives of all of those who have been lost in war, we also remember that early Methodism taught that war was a sign that we had not yet received the perfect love of God.

John Wesley was known – and ridiculed – in his day for his belief in the doctrine of Christian Perfection. His peers thought what many of us would think on hearing the phrase – how can we be perfect, or even bother trying to be perfect? But John Wesley insisted they didn't understand true, scriptural perfection. While none of us can be perfect by our own ability or will, we believe that through Sanctifying Grace we are transformed into a greater likeness of Jesus. We believe that through Sanctifying Grace we are blessed by occasional moments, fleeting instances, of knowing and living in God's perfect Will. This is what Wesley means when he says that we are all to be "Moving on toward Perfection." To **sanctify** is "to set apart for special use or purpose," "to make holy or sacred.

There's a story that illustrates this concept. I've heard it set in several different parts of the world - sometimes in China, sometimes Africa. It's a story that takes place where people have to carry water long distances. A child carries water each day from the well to his home in the village. She uses a pole across her shoulders to balance the jugs on each side, day after day, year after year after year. One of the pots had a crack in it, and while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the masters house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

After a time, So one day the jugs began to speak. The uncracked jug, the "perfect one" that did its job well, exclaimed, "I am such a good and perfect jug. I do my work just right. You, on the other hand, are lousy and worthless. Your purpose in life is to carry water from the well back

to the village, and look at this: Day after day, year after year, only half of your water makes it home. You're always going to be like this. I think our water bearer should get a new jug and replace you."

The poor cracked pot was devastated, ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. It called out to God "Why have you done this to me? Why is my pot cracked? I am no good. Because of my flaws, the water bearer has to work twice as hard." The water bearer could hear this anguished plea to God and felt sorry for the old cracked pot and spoke to the cracked pot: "As we return to the masters house, I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the path." Indeed, as they went up the hill, the old cracked pot took notice of the sun warming the beautiful wild flowers on the side of the path, and this cheered it some. But at the end of the trail, it still felt bad because it had leaked out half its load, and so again the Pot apologized to the bearer for its failure. The bearer said to the pot, "Did you notice that there were flowers only on your side of your path, but not on the other pots side? That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of it. I planted flower seeds on your side of the path. They flourish because the water that drips slowly from your cracked jug gives life to what would not otherwise exist all along the road we travel. Through your crack in this otherwise perfect jug, you have brought life and beauty to an otherwise desolate and barren stretch of road. I will not change you for another pot, nor will I let anyone discount the good that your crack has done."

Jer. 18:1-4 *The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.* When watching a potter working clay on a wheel, is that it takes both external pressure on the outside, and internal pressure as well, both from the potter's hands, to bring the clay up into the desired shape. The wrong proportion of pressure won't make the shape that's intended. So too, as Christians we need to do both the internal and the external work that will cause us to be shaped in God's hands into the creation we are to be.

Each of us has stories about the broken, the chipped places of our lives. There are ways in which we are broken people, a broken community, and a broken world. When the pottery of our lives has actually broken apart or cracked or chipped, God is still the potter who helps us to put it back together in a beautiful fashion. Around the world exist cultures who place greatest value on old, worn, and even cracked pottery. In some parts of Asia, the cracks in beautiful vases are filled with silver in such a way that the silver lines become part of the artfulness of the vase. Lines of precious metal have created an even greater work of art than before. In many parts of this world the most valued bowls and pots are not the new ones, but those that have been handed down through the family, or the ones that serve as reminders of the ordinary, the special and the sacred occasions of life. Their cracks, dents and chips make them more sacred than anything that is pristine and perfect. Each of us has our own unique flaws. We're all

cracked pots. But God can & will use our flaws. In Gods great economy, nothing goes to waste.

1 John says “if we love one another, God lives in us. Love has been perfected among us, there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us.” For Wesley, for John, being made perfect is a process we go through as we learn to let God’s love completely take over our lives, so that as God is love, we too are being filled with God’s perfect love. The more we love, the more we become like Jesus, the more we are filled with God, and the more we are, in the best sense of the words, being made perfect.

So, I ask you the questions that are asked of all who seek ordination in The United Methodist Church, because they’re really more questions about discipleship than questions about being a pastor: “Are you going on to perfection?” and “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?” I hope your answer is yes.