

Sermon Note: Growing in Grace

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction

This is the final week of *Knowing Who We Are*, six weeks drawn from Rev. Dr. Lacey Warner's book of the same name. We started with the grace God pours into us, then followed it through connexion, small groups, mission, and scripture. Methodists speak of going on to perfection, growing in grace across a lifetime. People grow in faith slowly, and much of what forms them happens through repetition, in work that seldom feels like formation at the time. In our readings this week, we explore how our own work and God's work within us belong together.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rKS-PjWXU8>

In this clip from *The Karate Kid* (1984), Daniel LaRusso finishes another round of chores for Mr. Miyagi, who agreed to teach him karate, and then says what he thinks of the arrangement...

Why This Video?

Daniel asks Mr. Miyagi for karate lessons and instead gets a to-do list. The instructions are detailed and without reasoning: sand this way, wax that way, paint up, paint down, and don't forget to breathe. After days of work, Daniel says he hasn't learned a thing, and from where he's standing that's a fair complaint. Then Miyagi has him show each chore's motion, one after another: sand the floor, wax on and wax off, paint the fence, and each one turns out to be a karate move. The work he resented is the training he asked for, and he learned it before he understood it.

Video Discussion Questions

1. Mr. Miyagi hands Daniel a bucket, and later a paintbrush, and corrects his wrist and knees without telling him why. What do you think it takes to keep going in that situation?
2. Daniel spends four days sanding, waxing, and painting, then says he's learned nothing. Have you ever worked hard for someone and felt like it didn't make any difference?
3. In the midst of the back-and-forth, Miyagi tells Daniel that not everything is as it seems. What do you think he wants Daniel to understand?
4. Miyagi has Daniel show him each chore's motion, one after another. What does Daniel discover about the last four days? What do you think Daniel is feeling in this discovery?
5. Miyagi ends with "Come back tomorrow." What do you think Mr. Miyagi is communicating and what do you think it means for Daniel?
6. Has anyone ever taught you something by having you do it over and over? What was that like at the time, and how did you feel afterward?

Philippians 2:1-13 (CEB)

¹Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, ²complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. ³Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. ⁴Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. ⁵Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

⁶Though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
⁷But he emptied himself
by taking the form of a slave
and by becoming like human beings.
When he found himself in the form of a human,
⁸he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.
⁹Therefore, God highly honored him
and gave him a name above all names,
¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus everyone
in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow
¹¹and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹²Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. ¹³God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.

Matthew 21:23-32 (CEB)

²³When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him as he was teaching. They asked, "What kind of authority do you have for doing these things? Who gave you this authority?"

²⁴Jesus replied, "I have a question for you. If you tell me the answer, I'll tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things. ²⁵Where did John get his authority to baptize? Did he get it from heaven or from humans?"

They argued among themselves, "If we say 'from heaven,' he'll say to us, 'Then why didn't you believe him?'" ²⁶But we can't say 'from humans' because we're afraid of the crowd, since everyone thinks John was a prophet." ²⁷Then they replied, "We don't know."

Jesus also said to them, "Neither will I tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things.

²⁸"What do you think? A man had two sons. Now he came to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.'

²⁹"No, I don't want to,' he replied. But later he changed his mind and went.

³⁰”The father said the same thing to the other son, who replied, ‘Yes, sir.’ But he didn’t go.

³¹”Which one of these two did his father’s will?”

They said, “The first one.”

Jesus said to them, “I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God’s kingdom ahead of you. ³²For John came to you on the righteous road, and you didn’t believe him. But tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. Yet even after you saw this, you didn’t change your hearts and lives and you didn’t believe him.

Scripture Study Questions

1. Paul asks the Philippians to do nothing “for selfish purposes” and to think of others as better than themselves (v3). What do you think it would look like to live that way? What makes it hard?
2. In verse 5, Paul writes, “Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus.” The Greek word behind “attitude” covers thinking, attitude, and behavior. What could it mean to have the mind of Jesus? Do you think that means we all think alike?
3. Paul writes that Jesus “emptied himself by taking the form of a slave” (v7). What stories from Jesus’ life come to mind when you read that?
4. Paul tells the Philippians to “carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” and then says God “enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes” (v12-13). How do you understand our work and God’s work together?
5. The chief priests and elders ask Jesus who gave him his authority, and he asks them about John instead (v23-27). Why do you think he answered that way?
6. One son tells his father no and goes to the vineyard anyway; the other says yes and stays home (v28-30). Which one do you recognize in yourself? What were the circumstances? What do you think about it now with the benefit of hindsight?
7. Jesus says tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God’s kingdom ahead of the chief priests and elders (v31). What do you think Jesus is trying to tell them?

Additional (Optional) Questions

1. In 1742 John Wesley answered the question “Who is a Methodist?” this way: a Methodist is one who has “the love of God shed abroad in [one’s] heart.” As we conclude this series, how would *you* answer that question?
2. For Professor Lacey Warner, *holy tenacity* describes “God’s work in us courageously and persistently.” What does that phrase bring to mind for you?
3. When did you last take time only to think about what following Jesus means to you? How do you make time for following Jesus between Sundays?
4. Over these six weeks we’ve explored grace, connexion, small groups, mission, scripture, and growing in grace. What stood out to you most, and why?
5. What did you learn about being a Methodist that you didn’t know before? What do you think you’ll do differently because of it?

Weekly Action

This week, pray John Wesley's Covenant Prayer aloud. Consider praying slowly, and consider saying it twice:

We are no longer our own, but thine.
Put us to what thou wilt, rank us with whom thou wilt.
Put us to doing, put us to suffering.
Let us be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let us be full, let us be empty.
Let us have all things, let us have nothing.
We freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art ours, and we are thine. So be it.
And the covenant which we have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

Then think about the last six weeks: God's grace offered to us all, the connexion we belong to, small groups, mission, scripture, and the spiritual growth that takes place over our entire lives. On a notepad or on a digital device, write down one sentence about what you think a Methodist is. Based on what you write, choose one thing you'll do, simple enough to start this week and repeat next week. Tell a loved one or a trusted spiritual partner what you chose, and ask them to pray for you and to check in with you about it.

Prayer

Modest God, you entered the world as a humble servant, Jesus Christ. You put the needs of others first. You fed the hungry, healed the sick, and ultimately took on the cross and conquered death. May we grow in grace, living as you lived. Help us put aside our own egos and desires, to instead show humility to all. Guide us as we carry out our salvation, trusting that you are at work in us. Through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

This content was developed by Rev. Bob Rhodes using source materials from Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church, his own original writing, and AI tools in alignment with La Jolla UMC AI Usage Guidelines. AI assisted with drafting and iterative refinement. All final text was reviewed and approved by Rev. Rhodes.