

On this Mother’s Day we give thanks to God for all the mothers in our lives. Our biological mothers and our spiritual mothers. These are the women who have shaped us into the Christians we are today. And today, we give thanks to God for the grace they bestowed upon us. When I became a mother four years ago, I became even more thankful for my own mother realizing she did all the same things for me that I do for my son. I look back now realizing she really embodied God’s grace in my life.

John Wesley, the founder of our denomination was also blessed by an incredible mother. Adam Hamilton writes in his book “Revival”: “Though [John Wesley’s father, Samuel] shaped his children, clearly it was John’s mother, Susanna, who had the greatest impact of their faith. She is often referred to as the ‘mother of Methodism’.”ⁱ Susanna was different from a lot of women in that time period.

She knew a lot about the Bible because her father was a Puritan minister in London. Her father insisted that she receive a full classical education which was unheard of at the time, and she carried this tradition into the lives of her daughters by teaching them to read and write.ⁱⁱ

As I think about all the parents trying to home school their children with varying lessons of success, myself included, Susanna would spend six hours a day teaching her children. In these times she also included family devotions. She cared deeply about the faith formation of her children. She would spend one hour a week with each child asking about “their faith, their fears, their hopes, and dreams and the state of their souls.”ⁱⁱⁱ This practice is what shaped John’s passion about the importance of small group ministry.

John deeply valued his mother’s wisdom and perspective. After she died, John built his home and the City Road Chapel (Methodism’s mother church) directly across the street from his mother’s grave. Hamilton shares: “She continued to inspire him years later after she had died” and “It is not an exaggeration to say that there would have been no Methodist movement had it not been for the faith and prayers of Susanna Wesley.”^{iv}

Through the love, faith, and time Susanna poured into her son John, he had a strong foundation to continue to spread the love and grace of God.

Our Scripture for today from 2 Timothy shares about a legacy of faith that was passed down from a grandmother to a grandchild. We too are invited to celebrate our legacy of faith today made possible by God’s grace.

As we continue in our fourth week of our “Revival” sermon series, today we remember that spiritual revival is not possible unless we accept God’s grace for our lives.

In our Scripture from Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul shares the words: “...by grace you have been saved...” (Ephesians 2:5b). It is all due to God’s grace in our lives that we can continue to be in a relationship with God in life, in death and in life beyond death.

Grace is the key to salvation, but so often it is something that is so hard for us to accept from God.

As we read through the Bible, we see that God is the primary actor in grace. Through prevenient grace, God invites us to be part of the covenant that started with Abraham and was made new in Jesus Christ.

I have experienced God’s prevenient grace in my life through all the people who invested their time in me to teach me about God. These were tireless Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, campus ministers, mentors, and my parents. All of these people interpreted God’s grace to me and made it real in my life before I could fully understand it for myself.

In the baptism of an infant, we see God’s prevenient grace at work. God is already at work in that child’s life because they are made in God’s image and surrounded by a community of faith who will help raise them to know who God is.

Through justifying grace, we can accept this invitation, profess Jesus Christ as our Lord, and repent of our sins. Then we are forgiven. Many people call this the moment of conversion. This is when we take the responsibility of our faith for ourselves.

For many this moment is a spiritual awakening or a time of revival. A time they feel they are on the mountaintop with God. I have seen so many people stay on this mountain and be so excited about God.

In The United Methodist Church this usually happens through our confirmation process, but can happen at any time in a person’s life. This is when we say out loud in front of a community of faith that we believe in Jesus Christ and we want to continue to follow Him with our lives.

We want to freeze time when we find ourselves in a time of spiritual revival, like Peter we never want to come down from the mountaintop with God. But we all know our lives have mountaintops and valleys and God is with us through it all.

To continue to grow in our faith we need God’s grace to carry us through. Through sanctifying grace, the Holy Spirit continues to make us aware of all the ways God continues to bestow grace in and through our lives.

Through sanctifying grace, we continue to grow in our love and knowledge of God. This is what discipleship is all about and once again, all made possible by God’s grace.

God’s grace is available to all people, if only we would receive it. Sometimes it is hard for us to fathom what Jesus did for us on the cross. That someone would give his life for us.

But we have a real-life example of something like this happening right here in Huntly. In fact, Willis Chapel got its name after a soldier named Albert G. Willis who was studying to become a Baptist pastor.

One day he and a fellow Confederate soldier were captured by the Union Army. They considered Willis’ unit led by John Singleton Mosby a nuisance and were ordered to execute one of these men to make up for the life taken of a U.S. soldier who was believed to be killed by their unit.^v

The story goes: “Col. William H. Powell spoke with the young man and told him that he could be spared execution if he claimed a chaplain’s exemption. Willis was quite aware that he did not deserve the distinction at this point in his studies and refused to exercise the option. Powell then ordered Willis and the other captured soldier to draw straws to decide who would lose his life...”^{vi}

Willis already gave up one opportunity to save his life by telling the truth. So then the two drew straws.

“The unknown man was the unlucky one; he burst into tears saying: ‘I have a wife and five children, I am not a Christian and [I] am afraid to die.’ Nobly, Willis replied: ‘I have no family, I am a Christian, and not afraid to die.’ With those words, the family man was released, and young Albert Willis was hanged from the limb of a large poplar tree in the tiny town of Huntly, Va.”^{vii}

Albert Willis gave his life to save the life of his colleague. So, Willis Chapel UMC was named in his honor as it is believed by many that he was hanged on the beautiful white oak tree in front of the church.^{viii}

So, it is on this holy ground that we see that grace was embodied for the life of another so that he could live.

Our response to God’s grace in our lives today is worship. That is what we do in this place every Sunday. We give thanks to God for the amazing grace that God offers to us each and every day.

In this season of Easter, as we continue to celebrate the resurrected Christ; we see this grace embodied through Jesus Christ as he continued to meet with his disciples after his resurrection.

Jesus taught his disciples so many things before he died. They probably would have been okay if he ascended to heaven directly after his resurrection. But Jesus stuck around for forty days after his resurrection and appeared to his disciples 10 times in order to continue to encourage and teach them for the ministry ahead.^{ix}

Through continuing to appear to his disciples, Jesus offered them grace through assurance. Here they continued to have evidence that Jesus, did in fact rise from the dead.

They could continue Christ’s story by continuing to proclaim that they too had seen the risen Lord. If that is not the most incredible testimony, I don’t know what is.

Although we cannot have this same experience of the disciples by physically seeing the risen Christ, we see the effects of Christ’s ministry of resurrection in the world.

We can be a part of Christ’ ministry of resurrection, when we like Andrew Willis, offer grace to our neighbors.

Rappahannock county is a tight-knit community and we need each other to weather this storm. We can bestow grace upon our neighbors during this time by checking on one another, by sending cards, by greeting those we see as we go on errands (from a safe distance of course).

Another way that I have seen grace embodied this past week is through one of our members, Mary Frances Bywaters. I went to Mary Frances’ house last week to drop off some receipts for the charge, since she is the charge treasurer. I went into side door with my mask on of course and she showed me hundreds of masks that she has sown for Valley Health.

She has lovingly cut fabric, sewed it, and tied knots on the end of each one to insure they will hold up.

This is grace embodied as these masks were surely save people’s lives and show them the love of God.

This is what God does for us. Through Jesus Christ on the cross, our spiritual lives were spared.

The good news for our lives today is that we too can experience God’s grace for our lives. We cannot earn it, but we are invited to accept it.

May we accept God’s grace for our lives today and embody it in the lives of others. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Adam Hamilton. “Revival: Faith As Wesley Lived It.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2014. P. 22

ⁱⁱ Ibid. 22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. P. 23.

^{iv} Ibid. P. 24 & 25.

^v <http://www.markerhistory.com/albert-gallatin-willis-marker-j-26/>

^{vi} <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2005/may/20/20050520-081044-4087r/>

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/rappahannock-news/20170727/281492161385623>

^{ix} <https://aleteia.org/2018/04/07/how-many-times-did-jesus-appear-after-his-resurrection/>,
<https://billygraham.org/answer/why-did-jesus-stay-around-for-40-days-after-he-came-back-from-the-grave-instead-of-going-immediately-into-heaven/>