

“Hope Never Fades” – April 28, 2024
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rom. 5:1-5

1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (NRSVUE)

Two young fish were swimming along, and they ran into an older fish going the other way. The older fish said, “Hey, how are you doing? How’s the water?” The two young fish looked at each other and said, “What is water?”

We are swimming in the ocean of God’s grace all the time. However, we often forget we are in that ocean. Just like the two young fish, we often ask, “What is grace?”

We breathe, live, swim in the ocean of God’s grace. God’s grace is everywhere. It’s all-encompassing. How blessed we are to live in the ocean of God’s grace in every moment. However, without knowing that we are swimming in the water, we often say, “I am thirsty! I am so thirsty! God, give me some water!” Can a fish be thirsty? Unfortunately, there are times when we keep our mouths closed and live like thirsty fish. There are times we try to block the flow of the Spirit. Or we walk so far away from the life-giving stream that we do not hear its sound, and we forget its power.

We may call these experiences spiritual exhaustion or emptiness. Or spiritual burnout. We are sometimes dry and thirsty, and this can happen to anybody at some point. That’s why we need to pray to God to come and refresh us. At the same time, there is one thing we must do. Do you know what that is? It’s simply opening our mouths. God always invites and awakens us to notice that we are already living in the ocean of God's grace, and all we must do is simply open our mouths, responding to God’s gentle and earnest invitation.

Today’s reading is about the ocean of God’s grace. Paul begins by describing how God's salvation manifests in the lives of those who are justified by faith. Paul believes that justification, which means restoring our relationship with God, leads to reconciliation with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Sharing his joy and confidence in God with his fellow Christians, Paul was inviting them to deepen

their relationships with God. In a new relationship, God's beloved, including you and me, can be at peace with God, also becoming stronger and more resilient in all circumstances.

No wonder Paul confidently said, "We boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance." Affliction includes challenging circumstances such as persecution. It also includes sorrow, want, illness, loneliness, and so on. Paul said that affliction produces endurance (or fortitude depending on translation), and endurance produces character. In this case, character means the metal which has been passed through the fire, and according to Paul, this character produces hope. I love Paul's last statement: "Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

Paul's teachings have significantly influenced Christian doctrines throughout history. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was one such figure influenced by Paul. Like Paul, Wesley's primary passion was about inviting fellow Christians to respond to God's grace and walk together on a lifelong journey toward salvation. Let me paraphrase Wesley's understanding of salvation: "From the beginning to the end, God invites us to the ocean of God's grace, calling, guiding, transforming, and saving us. In this lifelong journey of faith, there is one thing that does not change. That is, God's grace always comes first."

Wesley invites us to see the flow of God's grace in three different phases. These are prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. I will briefly explain them:

In Wesley's time, "prevenient grace" – sometimes called "preventing" grace – meant God's grace 'coming before' we know God and believe in Jesus. Prevenient grace allows people to have a growing sense of the need for God, and eventually leads us to repentance, which means turning our life, our whole body, toward God.¹ Sounds like mission impossible? It is aspirational because we are still broken and imperfect humans. But God reminds us that we are beautifully created in the image of God. Repentance is our response to God's invitation to begin our faith journey to see, and to become, who we really are.

Wesley called the next phase of God's grace "justifying grace." Justification is another word for pardon or forgiveness, and our faith is the necessary condition for

¹ Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*.

justification. In other word, we need to open our hearts and whole selves to God to receive and breathe in God's forgiving, healing, and justifying grace. Wesley said that justification is "what God does for us through his Son."

Justifying grace is directly connected to what we read today. In Romans 5, Paul said that "since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." Paul was the person who was at the forefront of persecuting the disciples of Jesus Christ. Amazingly, when Paul met the risen Christ, his life was completely changed.

For Paul, justifying grace was not a theological concept but a life-changing experience that comes from the power of God – who became one of us – to save us, to heal us, to change our heart of stone to a heart of flesh. God's grace is so powerful that even afflictions can give birth to hope. Hope is not simply our emotional response, but what God does for us through the Holy Spirit! We are weak and we easily despair and give up, but Paul encourages us to look to God, who turns suffering into hope.

God continues to work in us through the Holy Spirit, and we grow in this lifelong journey of personal and social holiness—a process Wesley called "sanctification."

As you may know, The United Methodist Church General Conference is being held in Charlotte, North Carolina from last Tuesday (Apr. 23) through May 3. It was originally scheduled to happen in 2020 but postponed until this year because of the pandemic. Although there are challenges and uncertainties, our consistent focus will be how to become a beloved, justice-seeking community of faith empowered by the Spirit of God.

John Wesley always believed Christian Conferencing is a means of grace. It is an important part of social holiness. I invite you to join me to pray for the United Methodist Church, the Body of Christ where we belong, and sing the song of hope.

I pray that this spirit of love and hope also prevails throughout all the sessions of the General Conference.

Let us be convinced, as Paul believed, that hope will not disappoint us, because God will pour out love, compassion, and the spirit of hope, into our hearts and the communities of faith, especially the United Methodist Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit! Hope never fades when God is with us. I love Paul's last

statement: “Hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” (Rom. 5:5)

Paul still invites all of us to notice that we are in the ocean of God’s grace. We are blessed to breathe, live, swim in the ocean of God’s grace. As Wesley taught us, our salvation is a lifelong process during which we joyfully respond to God's grace and love. Let us celebrate how dynamic and happy it is to live a life of faith in God’s abundant grace.

Praise the living God! Praise the risen Christ! Praise the life-giving Spirit! Praise the triune God from whom all blessings flow! And all people of hope say, Amen!