

Before getting started today, I'd like to fill in some blanks about my own life in the church. I was baptized and raised in the former *Methodist* and then *United Methodist* Church. But at the age of 26 I felt called to head in a different direction and ended up in the United Church of Christ where I was ordained and served for almost 13 years. I was happy to be with them. But then a strange thing happened: Around 1990, I began to have a recurring dream, once per month. In the dream I was a United Methodist minister, as I had been while in seminary. In my dreams I always had the same reaction... *"Oh no.... not that... they move you all over the place... 47 committees... Oh no!"* But then something would happen in the dream. I would suddenly realize *"Hey, this isn't so bad."* In September of 1994 I woke up one morning and told Jill "Hey, I think I'm supposed to go back and be a United Methodist minister." She said "Well, then do it." As soon as that happened, and I met with a DS a month later, I never had the dream ever again. And less than 3 years later, I peacefully departed from the United Church of Christ, and I came home. I have not regretted that decision for one day.

Now, I bring this up because I am United Methodist, not by birth, but by choice (and with some help from the dreams I kept having). Often we are the religion we are because we were born into it. We do it and we know no other options. That is not the case with me. In fact, for me to come home and transfer my ordination to the East Ohio Conference, I had to jump through 47 hurdles. I had to go before committees. I had to write 400 pages of material. Finally then in 2007 I stood on the stage at Hoover in Lakeside, and the Bishop shook my hand and said "Take Thou

Authority,” just as John Wesley said to those ordained long ago in England. From that moment I became FE, “Full Elder,” and was no longer OD, “other denomination” as I had been. And like I have said, I have had no regrets at all in returning to the church of my childhood.

Because of writing 400 pages of material, I learned a lot along the way. And as this has usually been the week each year when we head off to Lakeside for a week of “holy conferencing” as John Wesley would call it, because today is that day, it is also the Sunday of the year where I have emphasized something special about John Wesley and our Methodist movement, and I have enjoyed doing this for the last 23 years. Today is another day to share. I would like to think I have something to share, especially because I am United Methodist *by choice*. So let’s learn just a little more today. I will not wait a full year to do this again because we really need to know more about our heritage. But let’s start with some numbers. Please turn in your hymnal to # 337.

Our hymnals are designed in special ways. John Wesley was very organized and methodical, thus the name of our church. What do we see on #337? Well, what do we find? Let’s turn now to #361. Look over the next few pages. What extra do we see? Finally, let’s turn to #382. Do we find anything interesting there? If we keep going through our hymnal, all the way to #536 we see something that is the same until the next page. In those 200 hymns or readings, from 337 to 537, we find two sets of important numbers. Let’s do the big 3 first. Back on 337 we find an interesting John Wesley phrase: PREVENIENT GRACE. And

then on 361 it changes to JUSTIFYING GRACE. Then on 382 it changes to the final piece of the puzzle: SANCTIFYING AND PERFECTING GRACE. Okay. What is this all about? Well, it is the central belief of John Wesley on what it is that needs to happen to us all. It is the structure of Christian redemption.

According to John Wesley, this is what should happen to people. A true Christian experience of change and redemption involves three key things, and, these things must go in order. Stage one is what Wesley would call “Repentance.” Before anything else can happen to change a person’s life, there must be an experience of repentance, in which the person falls down before God and others and says *“I am a broken human, and I cannot rescue myself. Here I am before You O God, on my knees.”* Nothing can happen to a person without this first stage. And, according to John Wesley, God actually helps us with this first stage, with a thing called PREVENIENT GRACE. What is PREVENIENT? It means the “thing that comes before.” Something comes first. What? Well, according to Wesley, God is good enough to stir in our hearts and make us realize that we are lost on our own. *We will not find life on our own.* We need to acknowledge that there is a problem. Once we have realized that we cannot rescue ourselves or our world, then we’re in a place where God can start to work with us. And then we are ready for Stage 2: **Justification.**

What is this? It is a fancy word for forgiveness. When we are justified, it means that something has made things OK. Something has been fixed. We have been forgiven, once for all. Jesus has died for us and all the world, and we finally really

believe it. It is simply Good News. And this starts to change us. Guilt, grief, and regret over our torn up lives starts to fade. And that is good. Healing starts to come. In fact, Wesley would say that once again God provides the grace for us to accept this forgiveness. God provides JUSTIFYING GRACE. This helps us to believe that we really are forgiven. And this is great! But we are not done yet.

For John Wesley there is Phase 3, which also is necessary: Sanctification. What is this? It means we become HOLY, we are set apart from what is broken in this world. We begin to be different than we used to be. Does this mean we are perfect? No. But it does mean we are trying to head that way, on the way towards God and God's goodness. Does God help us head in that direction? Yes. God supplies what Wesley called SANCTIFYING GRACE. This helps us to move more and more towards the ways of Jesus our Brother, and therefore to the ways of God.

So according to John Wesley, we have three stages of Christian Growth and Life Change: Repentance, which means to turn and to change our thinking, and to do so in a big way. Repentance BTW is big, and it involves real change. It cannot just be a matter of saying we're sorry and then keep on doing what we used to do. There needs to be change. But once that is real for us, we move to Justification, or a peaceful sense of forgiveness. This is where the Cross comes in. We have been bought with a price as Paul would tell us. But it cannot be enough to just do the happy dance and say "I'm forgiven!" That simply

opens the door for us to head to our goal, which is Sanctification, or heading towards the perfection that God intends for us.

Heading back to the hymnal for just a moment, I'd like you to notice two things: First, there are different hymns that cover these three stages. So, frankly it is good for us to sing all three kinds. There are more of the Third kind because hopefully once we go past repentance and forgiveness, there will be a long road of growing as people of God. But there is one last quick Wesley number point for today. If anyone asks us as Wesleyan people, *what kind of Holiness do we believe in*, we answer correctly by smiling and proclaiming "We Methodists believe in 2 kinds of Holiness, Personal and Social." John Wesley would always tell us that it matters who we are on the inside, but also that we must be concerned about the world around us. Please notice #396 which we sang not long ago. PERSONAL HOLINESS. Now if we turn the pages, we'll see more of this. But then it changes. #425 gives us the powerful hymn "O Crucified Redeemer" and above that number it now says SOCIAL HOLINESS. This continues on up until #450 before the words at the top change to Prayer, Trust, Hope.

So to wrap this up, we have three stages of Christian Life, Repentance, Justification, and Sanctification; and we strive to live by two kinds of Holiness, both Personal and Social. More of this John Wesley training will be coming. But this is all for now. Thanks for taking it in. AMEN.