



Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



Unit 1: God's Grace Goes Before Us

Session 2: Grace > Fear

The Fear of God

Perhaps when you were young you encountered an angry adult such as a parent, teacher, or coach who responded to an infraction on your part by loudly declaring something like "I'll put the fear of God into you!" In my memory, this was shouted emphatically and succeeded in scaring the "living daylights" out of me, as we would have said in east Texas at the time. No doubt these adults from our memories meant well – at least most of the time – but they also gave young people a message: God was scary. God was eternally angry at me, child that I was, for my sinful nature and my sinful acts, and I should be afraid of this God who held my life in hand. After all, I could be struck down by lightning at any moment or turned into a pillar of salt like Lot's wife in Genesis 19:26.

This kind of fear enforced the image of God in my head at the time. It seemed to me that God was an old, white man who looked remarkably like Uncle Sam on the Army recruitment poster at the post office. His finger was pointing straight at me along with his gaze and, regardless of how I tried to move away from the poster to one side or the other, that finger and gaze followed me. My picture of God was, I must add, considerably meaner looking than Uncle Sam was. For one thing, the face and the finger were much bonier, and he seemed a great deal angrier. So between a well-meaning teacher, a softball coach, and the United States Department of Defense, I was left with the distinct impression that God was definitely one to be afraid of.

But in a biblical context this is not what "fear of God" means. We fear God when we respect God, consider God, and hold God in awe. For example, in the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18: 1-8, Jesus tells of an unjust judge who "neither feared God nor had respect for people." What does this mean? The unjust judge did not have regard for God. God was not considered, respected, or held in reverence by this man. Indeed having "fear" of God as it is most usually encountered in scripture is a way of saying "hold God in awe," not "be terrified of God."

Prevenient Grace Goes Before Us

Far from being a minor point of biblical wording, this fear thing is a big deal. Some well-meaning, faithful Christians teach that God is indeed angry at our sinful nature and our sinful acts beginning at our birth and continuing until such a time as we profess our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Wesleyan Christians, on the other hand, generally have a different understanding. Instead of God being angry at us from our birth, God actually loves us from our conception onward with deep, heart-felt, ardent love. We call this kind of love from God **prevenient grace** since it is the grace that goes before us into our lives by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is love that is present before our conception, before we could possibly invite Jesus into our hearts as Lord and Savior. God is as "crazy in love" with a newborn baby as the parents are because God is, well... like our Holy Parent..

In Isaiah 49 the prophet talks about this kind of love. "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me... and he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'" And in Romans 5, the apostle Paul states, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

The kind of love that calls us before our birth, and that self-sacrifices on our behalf, is God's prevenient grace.

Milk and Cookies Ministry

Even more, God pursues a relationship with us through all sorts of mechanisms. My husband's family did not go to church when he was young. Although they generally considered themselves to be Christian, what that meant was not spelled out for him in any kind of concrete way. In the 1970s, children in elementary school in his hometown had an opportunity to attend religious education once a week as part of their school day. Students who did not participate would do an art project of some kind while

their classmates would climb the hill up from the school to the United Methodist Church in town for their brief time of religious education.

At the UMC with his friends, Blake would listen to stories from the Bible, sing a song, and eat a snack which consisted of homemade chocolate chip cookies and milk. When time was up, he would join his classmates in going back down the hill to his elementary school.

Milk and Cookie Ministry

I must say this did not originally sound very impressive to me; after all, Blake readily admits that he does not remember a single story told or song sung during that time. But he does remember the chocolate chip cookies. And the kind, loving, women who served them. As it turns out, this made quite an impression on him. Many years later during a tumultuous time in his life he decided to seek out a church home. And where did he look? Based upon his memory of kind ladies and homemade cookies, he looked to the United Methodist Church. God used those

ladies from my husband's childhood, and their cookies, to plant a seed within Blake's heart and mind that would eventually grow into a relationship with Jesus Christ. That is just one example of the prevenient grace present in Blake's life, and you and I have that kind of grace in our lives as well.

The truth is that God's grace is greater than our fear. God's grace is greater than our sin, our poor choices, our limitations, our circumstances, our families-of-origin, the social system into which we were born, the sins of others that affect us... pretty much everything. While it is appropriate to be in awe of God, it is not appropriate to be terrified of God. Grace is greater than fear.

Marsha Engle Middleton

United Methodist Identity Points:

- We are motivated to follow Jesus Christ because we embrace God's love, not because we fear God's wrath.
- Prevenient grace is God's amazing, all-encompassing love that precedes us in our lives from before our births. By virtue of the Holy Spirit, prevenient grace not only goes before us, but brings us along our path of salvation and restores us.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- How did you imagine God when you were a child? Was God loving and kind? Angry and harsh? Somewhere in between? How do you tend to envision God at this stage of your life?
- Have you ever been afraid of God as opposed to holding God in awe? Share your experience with a partner insofar as you are comfortable doing so.
- To what degree do you think people's fear of God's wrath interferes with them being open to a relationship with God? To what degree do you think that fear limits their interactions with the Church?