

“Walking through the Door of Religion”
Romans 1:16-17
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 25, 2009

Note: *The past few weeks I have attempted to talk about what we believe as United Methodists in story form. Doctrine can sometimes be quite dry, and I didn't want anyone nodding off during our short time together. So I came up with this imaginary conversation based on John Wesley's understanding of salvation, which he often referred to as “the house of religion.” I would love to hear whether or not this has been helpful to you or if you simply consider it another manifestation of your pastor's many neuroses.*

“...as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” Romans 1:17

“Justification is another word for pardon. It is the forgiveness of all our sins, and (what is necessarily implied therein) our acceptance with God.” John Wesley

As my new friend and I sat and sipped those cold glasses of lemonade, I thought back over everything that had already happened. I had awakened to find myself standing in a beautiful lawn that surrounded a quite stunning and very inviting house. As I was later to learn, the lawn, the trees, and the gardens that were full of beautiful flowers were what John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had called the yard of religion. It was there, of course, I had met my new, but seemingly very familiar friend. He came out of that old timber frame house that sat on the property wearing blue jeans and an old black Jimmy Buffet tee shirt. Curly black hair and a beard speckled with gray framed a weathered face. His strong hands were hardened by years of manual labor, and he had strange scars on his wrists. He never did tell me his name, but by now I had pretty much figured it out—or I knew I had at least a one-in-three chance of getting it right. Anyway, he had told me where I was and how I got here. He had shown me how through various events of my life I had been pushed and prodded down the path that led me to that yard. Using language that most Methodists hopefully understood, he called that pushing and prodding “prevenient grace,” the activity of God in people's lives before they were even aware that God had been active in their lives.

After a time of reflection, my new friend led me up to the house and stopped at the bottom of the three steps that led up to what the very practical Wesley had called “the porch of religion.” He explained to me that in order to walk up the stairs and onto the

porch I had to repent. Now I had heard that word before and, to be quite honest, it had always left a bad taste in my mouth. But as he detailed the whole process of repentance, I discovered an explanation that was not anywhere near the very frightening version I had heard from all those TV evangelists. In the biblical sense, repentance was nothing more than turning around and walking in a new direction. Ever since that little incident in that garden called Eden, men and women had set off on a path of their own choosing. That path took them away from the place they had been created to live—next to the heart of God. That decision to walk down their own path was called, in classic church language, “sin.” All those things people did that “broke the rules” were simply manifestations of that much greater problem of deciding to go their own way. Repenting grace, as Wesley called it, helped people to see that they were going the wrong way and start their journey back to the place they were created to be. And if they chose to take that journey, if they responded to repenting grace with repenting faith, it would inevitably lead up these steps and onto the porch where, with the help of my friend, I was ready to open the door that now stood in front of me.

We had been sitting comfortably on that porch for quite some time and sharing good conversation. But now my friend looked at me and said that it was time I started thinking about opening that huge oak door. As I had wanted to do just that since the moment I had arrived, I readily agreed. So after gulping down the last of my lemonade, we got up and walked to the middle of the porch. As doors go, it was quite impressive. It was built of quarter-sawn white oak that had been beautifully weathered, with three heavy iron strap hinges on one side, and an equally heavy iron doorknob on the other. And, of course, it was closed. “The next step on your journey,” my friend said, “is to open up and walk through that door.” That had been clear from the beginning. As I have mentioned, the old house seemed to be beckoning me to come inside. So I nodded my head and joked, “I’m sure old John Wesley had a name for this door. It seems he had a name for everything around here. So go ahead and tell me, what did he call it?” My friend smiled. “Bless his heart, he could be rather neurotic, couldn’t he? He wasn’t called a *Method*-ist for nothing! You’re exactly right; he did have a name for it. His name for the door of the house of religion was ‘justification.’”

I was stumped. Justification is not normally a word that I use in everyday conversation. My new friend must have noticed my confusion. So he asked, “Do you remember typing class?” Suddenly my whole countenance changed. “Oh boy, do I ever! All of us 9th grade boys took typing. Our teacher was right out of college. She had blond hair and was...” Thankfully, he grabbed me by my belt pulled me toward him before I could finish the sentence. I couldn’t believe how easy it was to almost fall off the porch of repentance! “In typing class,” he said, “you learned about justification. I realize that with computers you don’t have to worry about that much anymore. All you have to do is click a button on the tool bar. But see if you can think back and tell me about it anyway.” I thought for a moment, and then said, “If I remember correctly, justification meant setting your margins so that the beginning and ending of each sentence lined up and was in proper relationship with the others.” “Good. I guess you took your eyes off her long enough to at least learn that,” he joked. “Now using that as a basis, see if you can explain to me how people are justified.” I’m not sure I had it completely figured out, but I ventured a guess anyway. “Lining up our lives to be in relationship with some preset margin... Oh, I get it. That margin has to be God, right?” He nodded. “Very good. You’re on the right track. Through justification, people come into a right relationship with God. Remember, those same people had chosen to go down their own paths rather than the one they were created to walk. What is that called?” “Sin,” I replied. “That’s right. And in doing so, they messed up all the margins of life. Now tell me what you call it when—with God’s help—people turn around and start walking back to the one who has always loved them.” This one was easy. After all, I had already stepped up on the porch. “Repentance,” I said. “Good. Justification, then, is simply getting back into the right kind of relationship with God. Perhaps it would just be easier all around to think of justification as forgiveness. If you paid attention in your Methodism class in seminary, then you already knew that Wesley said, ‘The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins.’ Right?”

I didn’t want to say that I probably dozed off that particular day (or come to think of it, maybe that was on one of those numerous days that strange classmate of mine kept

talking about riding that bicycle of his), but I figured that the way things were going, he already knew. Any way, I liked that term a whole lot better. Forgiveness is much easier to understand than justification. “Oh, is it?” There he was again, reading my thoughts. I hated when he did that. But this time I admit that I really didn’t mind. “Forgiveness, as a word, may be an easier term to understand than justification, but that doesn’t mean that it’s easier to accept,” he said. “Ever since Adam and Eve, people have struggled with guilt. You are familiar with guilt, right?” I nodded in the affirmative. “Guilt is what happens when people realize how far they have separated themselves from God. Among other things, that realization robs men and women of peace, causes great sadness, and stifles their creativity. One of humanity’s greatest burdens is a guilty conscience. Justification, or the gift of forgiveness, erases a guilty conscience. But as I said, so many have a hard time with something so easy. They think they have to do something to remove guilt. It’s amazing to think of what some have done in that vein. Down through history there have been those who have sacrificed their children, those who have lived a life of self-denial, and those who have inflicted themselves with ridiculously brutal physical pain—all in a rather futile effort to get rid of their guilt. There have even been those who have tried to deny that guilt doesn’t exist. But every human effort to remove the guilt that is so very present in their lives has failed.”

I tried to ask a question, but he continued on. “Take Martin Luther, for example. He wrestled with the whole concept of guilt. He knew that he was not in a proper relationship with God. So he tried everything the church prescribed to fix it. He did penance endlessly, prayed constantly, deprived his body of the basics, took a pilgrimage to Rome—all the spiritual measures of his day that were thought to relieve the burden of guilt and get a person back into a proper relationship with God. Yet nothing worked. Martin spent years in spiritual agony feeling as if he was not accepted. He finally came alive when he came across that scripture from Romans he had read hundreds of times before: ‘The justified live by faith.’ He realized that *he* didn’t need to do anything to have a proper relationship with God. After all, he had already stepped onto the porch of religion, had already repented, had already turned around and began his long walk back to God. Yet even before he did all of that, his justification, his forgiveness, had already

been accomplished. On Calvary, you see, God had declared him ‘not guilty.’ All he had to do was reach out in faith and receive the gift that God so wanted to give him.”

I was confused. “You don’t have to do anything to receive forgiveness?” I asked. “That’s not what I said,” he responded with a smile. He thought for a moment, and then said, “It’s sort of like when Charlie was little and he used to crawl up in your lap and fall asleep. Remember? Felt great, didn’t it? Now you know that you did nothing to earn that kind of love. You certainly did nothing to deserve it. Yet because Charlie loved his daddy, he gave you something that to this day you still remember with great pleasure. It was a gift, pure and simple. But you did have to do something, didn’t you? You had to receive it. Just like the prodigal son had to let himself be embraced in the waiting arms of his father, you had to open your arms and let his love settle into your lap. That is what Martin Luther finally was able to do. When he read that verse from Romans, when he finally understood that all he had to do was receive the gift, it was like heaven had engulfed him. He knew his guilt was taken away. He knew he had been accepted. A whole new day was born.” My friend paused for a long moment. It was as if a great sadness came over him. He then said very thoughtfully, “It has always been amazing to me that the whole idea of forgiveness is so hard for so many to accept. Despite all the wonderful stories that have shown over and over again that grace is truly amazing, people still think they need to do something to earn their acceptance. Yet every time people discover that justification, or forgiveness, or whatever you want to call it is a free gift, big things happen. Augustine became one of the greatest Christian thinkers ever. Luther touched off the Reformation. Wesley started a movement that not only transformed England but the United States as well. Karl Barth helped steer the 20th century Church in a whole new direction. It’s amazing what happens when people discover that ‘the justified live by faith.’”

After hearing his explanation, I was more than ready to open and walk through the door. All I had to do was to receive the gift that God wanted to give me. Now that was really good news. So I stretched out my arm and reached for the doorknob. But as I did, my friend grabbed me by the wrist. “Hold on,” he said. “I need to tell you one more

thing before you open the door. You probably need to know that John Wesley was a ‘Yes, but...’ kind of guy.” I looked at him strangely. “What do you mean, ‘Yes, but?’ You just told me that there were no strings attached to the gift. So what do I have to do?” “Oh no, it’s nothing like that. There are no strings, I promise. God’s gift is totally free. Once you receive it, however, you’re never going to be able to keep it to yourself. You are going to want to share it with everybody. So here’s fair warning: if you open that door and walk through it, then get ready for a lot of hard work.”

At that point I was once again clueless as to what he was saying. There seemed to be a pattern here. Every time I thought I was getting it, he would add on another layer or so. I’ll have to admit that sometimes it got kind of confusing. So as I just stood there, with my arm still reaching for the doorknob, he started to explain. “Paul and my little brother James used to go back and forth over the relationship between faith and works all the time. Peter and Barnabas used to just back off and let them have at it. It was hilarious. They finally resolved their differences when they both realized that it *is* faith in God’s grace and not good works that justifies men and women, and yet once men and women are justified, that same faith encourages good works. Let me give you an example with which you should already be aware. Once old John Wesley knew he was forgiven, he just didn’t sit there and feel good about himself. It was impossible for him to keep what he had experienced to himself. So he not only started preaching, he also started Bible studies and Sunday Schools for those who were not welcome in ‘respectable’ churches, established hospitals and primary schools for the poor, and worked with the down-and-out and those discards of society. He was a classic example of that line my old fishing buddy wrote: ‘We love, because he first loved us.’ So just remember, if you go ahead and open that door, and walk through it, you’re going to be so filled with so much love that you won’t be able to hold it in. You are going to have to find a way to share it with others. I wanted you to know that before you went in. Now that you do, go ahead and open the door if you are ready.”

I must tell you that I didn’t even need to give it a second thought. I was as ready as ever. So I put my hand on the doorknob, turned it and pushed it open. And my friend

was right. A feeling of acceptance and love swept over me unlike I had ever experienced before, washing away everything that had ever held me back from loving God fully. In an instant, I knew that I was home. What's more, it was not just the old house that was now open to me; it seemed that the whole world was now open to me as well. And I immediately knew that I had to tell someone about it. Perhaps that is what Wesley meant when he said to his old bishop, "The world is my parish."

"Welcome home," my friend said, disturbing my thoughts. "It's great to have you here. Now that you're here, you will want to look around what the old Methodist called 'the house of religion.' Of course, as you know, he didn't stop there. This is the place he called 'sanctification.' Now there's a weird word. I'll tell you about that later. In the meantime, how about lunch? There's a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine on the table. Oh, wait; you're a Methodist, aren't you? That's okay. There's some grape juice in the fridge. Let's sit down, eat, and enjoy the gift of forgiveness."