

Exploring Grace: The Porch
Act 17:26-27
Sunday, May 31, 2026

It was June, 1986. I was just sort of drifting after graduating from UT and decided to go to law school. I had applied to only 2: the University of Washington and Gonzaga, both in Washington State. I visited Gonzaga first and during the tour, my guide took me down to the library basement, a place the students lovingly called “the pit.” And it was. No windows, flickering fluorescent lights, cigarette smoke soaked into the carpet and all the furniture. Now this was between semesters so there shouldn’t have been anything down there. But I saw a pile of books on a table and so asked my guide about them.

My guide told me the books belonged to a student who was saving her place for the Fall semester. Well, I was floored. You see, I got my undergraduate degree from UT back in the 80s and even then, you couldn’t hardly leave your books out to go to the bathroom without having to worry that they’d get stolen. And here was someone, trusting they could leave their books out where anyone off the street could just walk in and take them, for the entire summer.

I was sold. In what was either an act of sheer stupidity, or God reaching down into my life, or a little bit of both, I didn’t even bother visiting the UW. I decided then and there to attend Gonzaga.

That Fall, when I got to school, the pit had made such an impression on me that I started studying down there. I have to admit, I also wanted to meet the person who had left their books out on the table. After a while, I introduced myself. Her name was Kirsten. One day we went for a walk in the park, and 2 years later, we got married.

Today is the first day of our new sermon series that's all about God's amazing grace. Now, we've all heard about grace, right? For most of us, the song amazing grace has a special place in our hearts. But how often do we step back and really dug into what grace means and how it works. Well, that's what we're going to be doing for the next few weeks.

So, to start off, our English word "grace" comes from the Greek root, Charis, or gift. And I think that's a great description of grace. A gift. A gift that God gives us each and every day. The gift of relationship, salvation, reconciliation, and eternal life.

God loves us, and he shows that love through grace. And just as we show our love for those around us in different ways, so does God. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, used different terms to describe the different ways God shows His love for us; terms like prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. These different aspects of God's grace typically relate to different stages of our spiritual journey.

And, this morning, we're going to discuss the first one: Prevenient Grace. Now, "prevenient" is a word we don't use much these days. But it's really pretty simple. It's an old fashioned word that simply means, "to come before." Prevenient Grace is that aspect of God's grace that comes before we know God or even recognize our need for God. With prevenient grace, God is working on us even before we're aware of it; pulling us, pushing us, nudging us closer and closer to the one for whom we were all created.

John Wesley gave us a great way to think about this. Imagine faith as a house. Prevenient grace consists of the ways God uses to get you up on the porch; to get us ready to go thru the door and into the house.

And some of us, we spend a lot of time on that porch. I know I did. I was raised in the church, even went to Christian school thru 8th grade. But I never got past the first few steps of that porch. At least not until God led me to that dingy basement in Spokane Washington.

And even then, it was a long, slow process. Things really didn't kick into gear until about 1999. Neither Kirsten or I were in the church, but then Kirsten had a profound conversion experience and started going to church with our kids. At the time, I thought this was great since it meant I had my Sunday mornings free to do whatever I wanted.

And then, one Sunday we were driving to lunch after they had gone to church and I heard my oldest daughter chirp out of the back seat of the minivan, "Daddy, did you know dinosaurs aren't real?" I just ignored it, but she said it again, "Daddy, didn't you hear me? Dinosaurs aren't real." I think I said something like, yeah, yeah, whatever. And finally she said, "No, really, Dinosaur's aren't real." I got this weird feeling and so asked her why she was saying that. She then said that this was what her 2nd grade Sunday School teacher had told her— What we think are dinosaur fossils are really dragon bones and the earth is really only 10,000 years old. Now, you've got to remember. I wasn't a Christian. I didn't believe in young earth creationism, and I still don't. So, I looked over at Kirsten and said, we're going to talk when we get home.

And we did. I told her that she was never going to take my children back to that place. And Kirsten looked at me and said, fine, but "We ARE going to church and if we're not going there, then you're going to go with us." Suddenly and unexpectedly, I found myself back up on that porch.

Now, we've talked before about how God created us in God's image to be in relationship with God and with one another, right? Each one of us is, in a sense, "wired for God." We were created to live in God's house, in God's presence.

However, as we all know, we've messed that up. The story of Adam and Eve illustrates how humanity has chosen to rely on its own strength and smarts and ability rather than on God. All of us have made wrong choices that separate us from God. In other words, instead of living inside the house with God, we all too often find ourselves on the outside looking in.

But the fact is, God's grace is greater than all of our wrong choices. St. Paul says it this way in his letter to the Roman church, 8:38-39: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." God's going to do whatever it takes to get us back into that house. That's prevenient grace.

And that's where I found myself several years later. Turns out, Kirsten and several of the people at her church had been praying for me for a while. And once we started attending FUMC Round Rock, I found it wasn't as horrible as I'd expected. The preacher was relatable and funny. I learned to respect Jesus as a really smart and effective moral teacher. I still didn't get the stuff about Jesus being divine, but I was on that porch, and I was edging closer and closer to the door.

Then several things happened. Kirsten left a book out on my reading table "by accident": the Case for Christ. Of course, I read it and had to admit it was pretty persuasive. Then, I made

the mistake of making eye contact with our youth director one Sunday when I was picking our girls up from Sunday School and ended up as a youth mentor, where I saw Christ work in amazing ways in the lives of kids and adults. All of which culminated in me accepting Jesus as my savior in, of all places, a travel trailer on a deserted piece of hunting property out near Ballinger in 2004. I finally walked through the door.

But here's the thing. At no point in that process (except maybe the very end) was I pursuing a relationship with God. I never set out to find God or to give my life to God. I wasn't chasing God. As it turned out, God was chasing me. As amazing as it sounds, the creator of the universe was chasing me, seeking out a relationship with me, doing everything He could think of to get me up on that porch and into that house.

And, of course, it's not just me. The God of the universe wants that same sort of relationship with each one of us. And through prevenient grace, he prepares us to accept that relationship.

Now, some of y'all can relate to my story. God may have had to chase you down. Others maybe not so much. You may have grown up in the church. But God's prevenient grace has played a role in each of our lives, drawing us closer and closer to God through God's Holy Spirit.

We might hear the Spirit speaking to us through the hard things: the struggles, frustrations, difficulties and pain of unemployment, divorce, or the loss of a loved one. Or it might be the amazing things, like a sunset, or a transcendent piece of music or art, or the birth of a child. We certainly experience God's prevenient grace through the church, the body of Christ in the world, where we learn about God and get to see God in action.

In my case, even though I didn't know it at the time, the Holy Spirit was very clearly speaking to me, through those random books on that random table in Spokane, WA which led me to Kirsten; through Caitlin's little 2nd grade voice in the back of that van; through that book Kirsten left on my reading table; through that annoying youth director. Through the congregation at First UMC Round Rock, and through y'all.

That's right. As amazing as God's grace is, the MOST amazing thing about it is that God allows US to be its agents. God can, and will, work through OUR words, OUR attitudes, and OUR actions to help others open their hearts and lives to God. God certainly used Kirsten and Caitlin and so many others to reveal Himself to me.

And maybe God's even using this time we're spending together today to touch your heart in a new and different way. And it's my hope and prayer that God is using you, and will continue to use you, as a means of sharing His grace and love—as an agent of his prevenient grace, letting the folks around you know that they are loved and that they have an opportunity for a new and eternal life in Christ. Leading them up onto that porch, bringing them closer to Christ. So, here's my question for today: Will you do that? Will you share that amazing grace?