

September 26, 2021
Rev. Kerry Smith

The Church We are Called to Be
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Romans 10:14–15

New Revised Standard Version

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

I am a minister today because my parents brought me to church. We changed churches when my older sister was in seventh grade because a friend invited my sister to youth group. My sister liked their youth group so our family switched to that church. I would sing in the youth choir at 8:30 am worship, then go to Sunday School, then watch kids who were in the nursery at 11:00. I would come back that night for youth choir practice and youth group. During the week I would go to a small group Bible Study and the other four girls in that group are my friends for life. They were the bridesmaids at my wedding. When one of their fathers died of COVID last summer, we called one another and it was like no time had passed. We are scattered now, two in Houston, one in Austin, one in California, and me in Dallas, but those who could went to the funeral because when we were teenagers we were bound together through the church community. I found love and acceptance at church.

I look around at our church today and I miss folks. There are people who are waiting until their children can receive the COVID vaccine before they come back to in-person church. There are people who are waiting until it feels safer to return to in-person church. There are people who have moved away to Austin, Arkansas, Washington D.C. There are people who don't want to wear a mask and they have said they aren't coming back. There are people who realized during the pandemic that they didn't miss church and they have said they aren't coming back. It's enough to make you really depressed.

I know that this church has weathered incredibly hard storms before. November 9, 1941, almost eighty years ago, the first worship service was conducted at then Stonewall Jackson School with 87 Charter Members. A month later there was Pearl Harbor. They purchased this land in 1942, raised money all during the war, and broke ground on this sanctuary in 1946.

I think about what would have happened if no one had shared the news about this church. What if that group of 87 people had kept the good news about this place to themselves? I know that people who don't know the Christian story are not outside of God's love, but if we don't tell our children the Christian story, then the story will be lost in one generation.

Greg Basile is teaching Confirmation this fall with me and it's interesting when you think about what is it that you want seventh graders to know about their faith. You want them to know about the Christian Church's understanding of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. You want them to know the Christian faith is revealed in scripture, illumined by tradition, lived out in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. You want them to know about the first Methodist John Wesley. You want them to know that at the heart of Methodist theology is grace. God's undeserved, unmerited love for us. It is God's presence that creates, heals, forgives, reconciles, and transforms human hearts, communities and the entire creation. Wherever God is present, there is grace.¹ Grace brought creation into existence. Grace created humanity redeeming us in Jesus the Christ and continuing to transform the whole creation into God's reign of compassion, justice, generosity and peace.

¹ <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/a-wesleyan-understanding-of-grace>

John Wesley taught that all people are made in the image of God. In Latin that is called the *imago dei*. Wesley believed that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, all the sins of humanity were forgiven once and for all. God's work in Jesus Christ restores the *imago dei* in each person through salvation. Salvation for Methodists isn't about what people do, it isn't about saying a certain prayer, confessing, or accepting Jesus as our Savior. Salvation is entirely God's work as we move toward holiness and seek to do good.

We Methodists aren't once saved always saved people. We believe salvation happens many times throughout our lives because we spend our entire lives traveling on the path seeking to do good, always surrounded by God's grace. We have been saved, we are saved, and we are being saved. Salvation is about every single day allowing God to mold us into the likeness of Jesus. We can turn away from grace, we can ignore it or reject it and refuse to live in it. God is always faithful, even when we're not.

God is always there for us, like the love a parent has for a child. It exists long before we have any awareness of God's love or the ability to express love in return. **Prevenient grace** saves us before we even know we need saving. **Justifying grace** is God reaching out to us through the Holy Spirit to bring about repentance and a change in our hearts. It is an ongoing process that leads us to a renewed and restored relationship with God. **Sanctifying grace** is the work that God continues to do in our lives as we go into the world to love and serve others.

When John Wesley was in his 80s, he sent Thomas Coke on a boat to America with the last words, "Offer them Christ." There are over seven billion people on earth, and 1 out of 3 of them identify as Christian. The church we are called to be shares the story of God's love. The church we are called to be invites people to this church. The church we are called to be invites anyone and everyone in sight. When I think about how this church has embraced the Narcotics Anonymous groups that have been meeting here for the last twenty years I say yes, that is the church we are called to be. I remember reaching out to our Administrative Board Chair Bill Holston when New Church UCC needed a place to worship. New Church worships in our Glory Be Hall at 11:00 a.m. I told Bill that there was a church that didn't have a home that was filled with folks who had been hurt by the church before, people who were gay, people who were simply looking for a place to worship. Of course, we would welcome them, that's what Greenland Hills does.

My friend, Stacey Piyakhun, is a pastor in Melissa just north of McKinney, just south of Oklahoma. Last Sunday their church consecrated their new building. I talked with Stacey a few months ago because your generosity has paid down our Glory Be Hall loan so much (we are now at \$292,00 left on our loan) that I was dreaming about how we move to the next phase of rebuilding the west side of the building. Stacey would have these meetings about dreaming for their new building and creating a hub for the community. She would ask three questions: What are the needs of our community? (place to gather) What are the gifts of our church? (relational) Where do those two meet? (coffee shop).

The church we are called to be shares the good news of God's love and grace. The church we are called to be shares hope and invites people to come experience our generous God. There is an old saying that the only sin in the desert is to know where the water is and not tell anyone. After what we all have been through in the last eighteen months with the pandemic we are all grieving. We have water in this place and we can tend to the wounds this pandemic has opened.

John Wesley famously said, "Christianity is not a religion for solitude and solitary. The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." I find this place, with you my fellow believers, to be a place where I find God and where my faith grows. Greenland Hills is singles, couples, seasoned

theologians, returning religious refugees, and families of all kinds. We are inclusive, diverse, eclectic. We celebrate all people on the journey to being rooted in God's love, growing in the Christian faith and reaching out with compassion and justice. We can't do it alone. We need genuine community with other believers. This is where we find community and commitment.

We know there are some things we can fix and some things we can't. But the church we are called to be never stops trying. And when we get discouraged, Jesus is waiting for us to look up and realize that he is standing right in front of us, ready to take us in his arms. **Offer them Christ.** Thanks be to God, Amen.