

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Follow the Light

Gospel Lesson

John 8:12-14 (NRSVUE)

¹²Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." ¹³Then the Pharisees said to him, "You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid." ¹⁴Jesus answered, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going."

Bible/Sermon Focus

This week Pastor Phil gave us his final sermon from the pulpit of Manchester UMC, reminding us that Christ is the *light* of the world. "I am the light of the world" is one of the many "I am" statements about Jesus, which are all found in the Gospel of John. There are a lot of different terms we use to describe Jesus. But the "I am" statements are a bit different as they reach beyond just Judaism and resonate with a Hellenistic audience.

John was the last of the four gospels written down. The Jewish community and early Christian community had already parted their ways. Early Christians were meeting in house churches, and the community was expanding throughout the non-Jewish world. The "I am" statements are filled with symbols that would be known to Jewish people, but also known beyond that community.

"I am the bread of life."
"I am the living bread."
"I am the light of the world."
"I am the good shepherd."
"I am the true vine."

And that's just naming a few. In these verses from chapter 8 Jesus claims, "I am the light of the world." He does so during the Jewish feast of Tabernacles. This feast included the lighting of four large lampstands in the temple court. Candles and other forms of fire were used. But light was also a feature in Gnosticism, within the Qumran community, and during the festivals of multiple Roman and Near Eastern gods.

For the Johannine community (those who wrote down the gospel of John), this symbol of light is used in a quite dualistic fashion. The Johannine held a soteriology (understanding of salvation) and an eschatology (understanding of Christ's final revelation), that existed both in the future, but also in the present. We either live in the "light" or we live in the "dark." And a person can go from one state to another. But the Gospel of John (in its first Chapter) also associates Christ with the "Word" of God who was "in the beginning," as found in the first chapter of Genesis.

This "light of the world" is always there, and yet we can turn from it, back to the darkness. This

is a concept that resonates deeply within the Methodist traditions. Wesleyan theology does not hold a "once saved, always saved" belief system. Both John and Charles Wesley talked about "backsliding into sin."

Yet, as Pastor Phil mentioned, the prevenient grace of God remains always! According to Wesleyan theology, prevenient grace is found in all of creation. It's there before you know you need it, and it's there even when you turn from it. It is a grace, a presence of the divine, available always. We can turn toward that grace, or away from it. We can live in the "light" or the "darkness." But the light remains even when we turn from it.

In Methodism we use language around the word "grace" to explain the activity of God. There are three main types of grace that we talk about: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace.

God's prevenient grace, that Pastor Phil talked about, is at work in our lives before we even realize or recognize it. In God's prevenient grace, God invites/nudges/calls/guides us toward relationship with God.

It is in experiencing God's justifying grace that we realize that we need God's grace and we respond to God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We come to learn that we are forgiven and loved by God exactly *as we are*, and that we cannot earn God's grace. God has given this freely, for it is God's nature to do so.

In God's sanctifying grace we seek to become who God is revealing us to *become*. We do this by becoming more like Jesus Christ in the way we live and love. And in the words of Pastor Andy from last week, "sanctification is a group project." In sanctification we sin less, and love more.

There is no where we can go where we can escape the presence of God's grace. It is an open invitation throughout our lives for us to run from, be in, or come back into relationship with God. God's grace is a gift to us. We cannot earn it. We can only respond to it.

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus' "I am" statements made accessible his identity to people of different religious backgrounds. What other things unite us with believers of different faiths?
2. When have you experienced grace this past week? Which type of grace would that experience fall under?
3. Reflect specifically on God's prevenient grace, and that it's found through all creation and in all things. What do you think of that?
4. Reflect on this quote from Bishop Bob Farr, "... mistakes help you determine the right course. They are essential to leadership...recognizing failure gives confidence a good dose of humility." How does God use our mistakes? How is this grace?
5. This week we sang, "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing." Read the original poem ("Glory to God, and Praise and Love, number 58 in the UMH) and see if you can find examples of prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace.

Link to poem: https://hymnary.org/text/glory_to_god_and_praise_and_love.

Prayer

Light of the World, we praise you and thank you for your unending grace that holds us, guides us, shapes us, and leaves none of us behind. We pray blessings and thanksgiving on Pastor Phil as he moves on to his next appointment. Hold him in your palm, O God. Amen.

*"But out of all the Lord
Hath brought us by His love;
And still He doth His help afford,
And hides our life above."
-Charles Wesley*