

I'm going to start in a place that is sure to make all of you with United Methodist backgrounds happy. But don't get too happy. This is a Lutheran holiday so we're going to get around to trashing those ideas.

I want to start with the idea of "prevenient grace". I say it's a Methodist teaching because while the idea is ancient, the current form of the idea was popularized John Wesley. You see, the idea of grace has a big problem. If you think about it much at all you realize that it takes away free will.

Grace means "unmerited favor." Someone approves of you without you deserving it or earning it. In the case of theology it means that God approves of you and you can do nothing to deserve or earn it. But then, what happens to your free will? Are you able to reject it? What if you don't want it? What if you don't want God to approve of you? That sounds stupid, but if you can't get away from grace then you have no real freedom.

The idea of prevenient grace suggests that God's grace comes to you as an opportunity - God offers it to you as a gift, and then you are free to accept it or reject it. For John Wesley prevenient grace was an idea that solved the conflict of grace and free will.

Wesley took the idea one step further. Wesley said that when a person accepted God's grace - or lived in cooperation with God's grace - he or she would begin a journey of additional spiritual awakening and deepening faith. The technical word for this process is sanctification. According to Wesley the longer you lived the more holy you became. However, this journey was not one of arrogance. You weren't supposed to be proud of being holy. You were supposed to be humble knowing that the holiness that was developing in you was not your own, but God's work.

So far so good. It all makes sense and seems reasonable. But there are problems. Wesley lived in the 18th century. Two centuries before, early in the 16th century a very troubled man was also struggling with prevenient grace. This man saw where these ideas came from in scripture. He saw the benefits of this

idea system. He wanted to believe it, but he couldn't get over the problems. As you can probably guess, this man was Martin Luther.

Luther ultimately rejected the idea of prevenient grace for two reasons. One, prevenient grace assumed that a person could accept or reject God's grace. Ultimately then the person, and not God, was in control. Luther never accepted any idea that didn't leave God in complete and total control. If you had the power at some point in your life to accept or reject God's grace and you accepted it, then you also had the power at some other point in life to reject it. What happens to your eternal salvation if in a moment of anger or confusion you reject God and then you die. That's not true grace.

An example of true grace that I like to use is my colleague Johanna Rehbaum. When she was diagnosed with cancer as a teenager she railed against God in anger. She said to God that she didn't believe, she never would again, and as far as she was concerned God could go to hell. That attitude lasted for about three days. And then somehow, somehow she recognized that God was saying no to her. No, he wouldn't go away and he wouldn't

let go. Parting ways was not an option. She was powerless. That's the true full grace that Luther discovered and it is what boldly empowered him to put his neck on the line numerous times in his life.

The other reason Luther rejected prevenient grace is that he anticipated where Wesley did eventually go with it - that a person who accepted God's grace would grow in faith and holiness throughout life. That just didn't happen.

Luther saw in himself and in others an ongoing war. He didn't feel more holy this year than he did last year. Maybe he was wiser, but not more holy. And for every act of goodness or holiness he tried he discovered that evil was right at hand undoing it. Luther said that every time God builds a cathedral the devil builds a chapel right beside it.

Luther and others of his time coined a phrase, "simul ustis et peccatur," which is Latin for "simultaneously saint and sinner." And that is the whole point of what I want to get across on this Reformation Sunday as we look at what is the heart of this ideology within Christianity known as Lutheranism.

The world is full of ambiguities and complications. Right and wrong often seem mixed. And too often impossible contradictions occur. Some churches call people who obey God's will "saints" and those who disobey "sinners". Lutherans cling to a both/and understanding. You are a saint and a sinner. Our righteousness always depends upon God's grace, never on our own religious behavior. At the same time, sin, while forgiven, remains a powerful force in the world and in ourselves. We're not going to delude ourselves into thinking that we are somehow growing more righteous.

Saint or sinner, grace or free will, belief or doubt, law or gospel: these are all tensions, contradictions in life. And to which we answer simply "yes". There are many religious belief systems within Christianity. Some try to explain everything. The Lutheran movement is among those willing to accept and even embrace the contradictions; knowing that somehow there is a deeper truth to be found in that. In Romans 7 St. Paul writes, "I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin

that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ my Lord!"

That is ultimately our answer. God wins! Grace wins, forgiveness wins, the gospel wins. Ultimately salvation from the mess and contradictions of this world is God's work. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!