

Today we wrap up our sermon series - the United Methodist perspective on Death and Resurrection, with this day, All Saints Day, as the focal point. I've taken time the last three weeks to highlight the members and constituents of Corona UMC who passed away since last All Saints Day. Today I'll briefly mention the last three in the group of 7. And I'll begin by saying a few words about Ken Varela.

Father of Cat Varela, one of our dedicated young adults here, and the husband of Merrilee Varela - who gifts our church by teaching Sunday School and has led the youth on Sierra Service Project in the past. Ken and Merrilee had been married just two months shy of 30 years when we lost Ken last January.

Both Ken and Merrilee were from San Diego originally and had met there. Ken was raised Catholic, but Merrilee and her family were very active at La Mesa 1st UMC, so Ken and Merrilee were married at that church. They moved here to Corona for Ken's work at CalTrans as an inspector in 1999. Merrilee told me the touching story that Ken planned Christopher, their oldest boy who's now 27, married and lives in Placerville, that Merrilee planned Matthew, their next boy who's 24, married and in the Air Force and that God planned Cat, their youngest girl, since both Merrilee and Ken had THOUGHT they were done having children when Cat came along as a sweet surprise.

Ken loved being a father, was very generous - to the point of giving the shirt off his back if needed - and had very much been looking forward to being a grandfather. He had a strong faith in Christ and believed in teaching his kids by example. I'd say a country boy at heart who's truck still has this bumper sticker - "Don't mess with my daughter or my truck." Sadly, you all were not able to gather last January to celebrate Ken's life as Covid kept you apart at that time. So today we honor and celebrate Ken Varela. In God's loving care forever.

Let's turn now to our last question of this sermon series - a series which does NOT cover all the questions you or I still have about Death and resurrection, but I hope will shed a little more light on the topic for today at least. Is Heaven Our Only End Goal? What I mean is - from a Methodist perspective, is being saved, claiming a stance of being born again and thus being assured a place in

heaven - the end purpose of our faith? Once we're saved, are we good with God and just do whatever we want with our lives? I would say this is another distinct point of Methodist or Wesleyan - stemming from John Wesley, Wesleyan theology - theology as an understanding of God - a point that stands apart from other Christian denominations. Wesleyan theology of God points not only to SAVING grace - being born again - but ALSO to Preventive Grace, which comes before saving grace and Sanctifying Grace, which comes after saving grace.

This last one - Sanctifying Grace - points especially to a great purpose in life now - just as great as eternal life with God when our time on earth is finished, which saving grace assures. So this is an important and distinct Wesleyan or Methodist understanding of God you want to think about for yourself and decide if you agree with it - or not.

The Methodist church, in its doctrine, claims a belief in Preventive Grace, Saving (or Justifying is another word for this) Grace and Sanctifying Grace.

Preventive Grace states that God, in God's greatness, calls us first to know Him. Not that **WE** know God, but that before we can even begin to understand anything about God, God is at work in our lives, wooing us to be in relationship with Him.

For me - this works out in the form of my parents taking me to church from infancy. Taking me to Redondo Beach United Methodist Church for Sunday School all those years and to VBS in the summers and to choir & drama on Wednesday nights in elementary school and to bells on Thursday nights in Junior and Senior High School and to Confirmation and youth group until I went off to college. Did I know who God really was from the very beginning? Not completely. But through my parents, family and friends God was wooing me with love. This is Preventive Grace - pre - meaning coming before saving grace.

What does Preventive Grace look like in your life? If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior, in what ways did God woo you or prepare you in your life to accept Him as your Lord and Savior? Please - find someone today or tomorrow to tell this story to, someone who will listen well. And find someone to ask this question and listen to them as well. As an example of preventive grace, I'll say a

few words now about another CUMC saint we recognize - Ray Encino.

Ray was the husband of Diane Encino - they celebrated 45 years of marriage this past year. You also might not have known Ray *REALLY* well. Though also a person of strong faith in Jesus, Ray was quiet about his faith, kind of like Ken - and also like Ken was raised Catholic. But Diane, who served and worked about 30 years here as our church secretary - doing anything and everything to serve God here, as far as I've been told - Diane brought Ray near to us at Corona UMC. And now their daughter-in-law, Caren, and two grandchildren - Jake and Russel - come almost every Sunday to soak up stories about Jesus in Sunday School and sing praises with us in worship.

When I think about prevenient grace - I think about the sweet story Ray himself told me when we had a chance to meet and talk in my office, he and Diane, just days before he passed away - the story about how they were both attending college at Cal State Long Beach - Ray in his last year - Diane in her first year - and Ray sat in the first day of sociology class with a briefcase open on the desk in front of him and Diane walked in and said to herself - this is someone who's got it all together and his priorities straight - I'm going to sit next to him and introduce myself. Ok, that might be an exaggeration about what Diane was thinking, but the gist of it is right. The honest truth, however, is what Ray said about this story in his own words - Yep, she picked me up!

Prevenient Grace - God working through that moment to bring together two people who loved Him, who in the future would create a family who continues to love and worship God even now. Today we honor and celebrate Ray Encino. In God's loving care forever.

We miss our loved ones who have passed on before us, but we remain. Does being a Christian in life mean that our only end goal is to be saved and look forward to that day when we'll be reunited with those who have passed on - and be reunited with Jesus in heaven?

Once again, the Methodist or Wesleyan perspective would say that although Saving Grace, also known as Justifying grace, is imperative - is a must - that moment in our lives when we too know

God loves us and we say yes to Jesus in our hearts - that THIS life is really more about Sanctifying Grace.

Sanctifying Grace is that work of God in life that encourages us to be more like Jesus every day. To be willing and desiring to be transformed. You've heard me say the phrase "Going on to perfection". Not that we ever reach perfection. Thinking we are perfect is a sign of our imperfection. But that the love of God calls us continually to sanctification - to be set apart from the temptations of this world and help usher in the fullness of God's kingdom on earth every day. To be whole and holy as the Holy Spirit fills our lives with love for God, our neighbor AND ourselves as we begin to live differently.

You might know the story about the brothers John and Charles Wesley, two of the founders of the Methodist movement. They were ordained Anglican priests in England, so the Methodist church, in a sense, was birthed from the Anglican church, though John & Charles never meant to begin a new church. They just wanted to transform their original church.

They were students at Oxford university and as young Christians inspired by the Holy Spirit, they looked around their Anglican church and saw people who claimed to be Christian, but whose lives didn't reflect any sense of devotion or love of God. So they began a club at Oxford with the aim to take communion once a week, pray every day, spend three hours every day studying the Bible and visit prisons regularly in order to take food to the prisoners, because in those days prisons did not provide food and prisoners depended on relatives and friends for food.

Because of their choice to lead lives of devotion this way, others looked down on them and began to call them names to make fun of them. Other people called them - the Holy Club, Bible Moths, Enthusiasts, Methodists, because they were methodical in their devotional practices. Originally John Wesley didn't like the name Methodist, but he realized it was sticking so he turned it around by adopting it himself for this movement of faith. Did you ever wonder where the term "Methodist" came from - maybe you knew already?

And so I continue to do something really strange here at Corona UMC as I've come as your new pastor - instead of keeping our Bibles neatly stacked and clean on the rack in the back of the

church, I've put them out for you on the chairs - to hold and open and flip through read and use. Not only that, but I encourage you to bring your own Bible that you read on a daily basis at home that you can put notes in and refer to as you continue to become sanctified by God's grace by sticking close to God's word.

That's why I chose this passage in Nehemiah to read today in worship. This is probably my favorite book in the Old Testament. It's only 13 chapters and it's a very encouraging book. Basically, the people of God, called the Israelites or Hebrews, had been exiled from their homeland and taken captive by the Assyrians and Babylonians to their home land instead - not all of Israelites, but the majority were taken captive - mostly the upper class or leaders. This book begins with one of the exiles named Nehemiah asking his friends about the condition of those who escaped captivity and were back in Jerusalem. The report he receives is a very bad one. Basically the city of Jerusalem is in great trouble, because the city wall is broken down and the gates are destroyed by the invasion. This news makes Nehemiah devastatingly sad so that he calls out to God for help that he might gather his people and ask the new king of Persian to go back and restore the city wall and it's gates. The section we read today is after the work of rebuilding is done so the exiles can return to live in the city and be safe again.

One of the things that Nehemiah realized caused God to allow them to be made captive, was their lack of devotion to God. So in this portion of scripture, Nehemiah 8:1-3, he reinstates something very important. The scribe Ezra read from the Book of the Law, most likely part of the 1st 5 books of our Old Testament today - called the Pentateuch. Did you catch how long they read? From early morning until mid day - probably about 6 hours. Anyone here want to stay for the next 5 hours and listen to me read from Genesis and Exodus?

The point is - they had fallen away from reading the words God had given them, much like the early Anglicans had fallen away from reading the Bible as part of their devotional life.

So here I am today - preaching about this question - Is heaven our ONLY end goal? The Methodist perspective would say no - that sanctification - going on to perfection by living

differently than the rest of the unbelieving world and yearning to be more like Jesus - is JUST AS important a goal as being born again or justified by God's grace. And one very powerful way to receive God's sanctifying grace is to continue to read and study the Bible personally.

Please hear me - if you want your life to be different, your soul to be revived - open the Bible for yourself - read it, ask God for help understanding it. In the new year, I'm going to be offering the first of a three part Bible study to help everyone that is willing to read & study the Bible themselves. The first study is called "What is the Bible?". I'm going to be offering a session in person and a session online. I look forward to offering this opportunity - I hope you are too. And God bless us as we make sanctification in life a goal as well as heaven.

In closing, I offer a few words about Sally Carlson. Though I'm sure Sally was as precocious as we all were in childhood, her saintliness peeped out as early as age 6 when she and a friend took their little red wagon door to door collecting shoes and coats for the Los Angeles Union Mission. Fast forward ABOUT 45 to 50 years and that saintliness ran full strength in her 10 year role as President of the Board of Directors of Settlement House. Between those times she and her husband of 57 years, Dick, accomplished no small feat of adopting and raising, not only three children formally, but many children informally. 25 years as a cook for God's kitchen - serving meals once a month for the homeless, about 20 years as superintendent of Sunday School and 9 years directing a musical group here at Corona UMC and many other community service leadership roles throughout Corona and Norco proved God's sanctifying grace working through Sally and helped usher in the fullness of God's kingdom on earth. Sally, Ray, Ken, Beulah, Georgianna, Guy and Pat, we celebrate and honor you today. In God's loving care forever. Amen.