

# Personal Theological Statement

The purpose of this essay is to address the foundational aspects of my understanding of the Christian message and to give an explanation as to how these aspects influence and affect my life and ministry. In providing that response I will begin by walking through those aspects which inform and shape my personal theology before articulating their influence on my life and ministry.

The foundational aspects of my personal theology and understanding of the Christian message begin with a belief in one holy and everlasting God who exists in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but share the same substance and being. I believe that the essence of God's being, which exists in these three persons of the trinity, flows directly out of that which is central to God's identity & character. At that core, I believe that God is love, and the activity of God is God's grace. Out of this activity, I understand God to be the creator of the world, the redeemer of all things and the sustainer of all life.

The creation stories we find in Genesis communicate two important truths which influence my theology in a dramatic way. First, this story speaks to the idea that God is both the creator and source of all life. In the first creation story, God speaks creation into existence and sets in motion the dynamic process by which creation itself participates in the continual re-creation of all life. In the second creation story, we find this creator God breathing into a clay formation in a way that animates this earthly shell and creates life. In both stories, life flows from the mouth and breathe of God. Secondly, this story speaks to the essential goodness of that which God has created. It is the refrain of the first poem. God's creation is continually evaluated and at each stage it is found to be good. In chapter three, the story changes as humanity's actions create a fracture in the human condition as well as the entire created order. That which God has created as good has not suddenly become evil. Rather, a brokenness falls on all creation. Suddenly, things are no longer as they should be in this new world of God's design.

Sin has entered the picture, and the effects of these transgressions have permeated the entire created order.

It is in response to this brokenness that God seeks, out of the love and grace that is central to God's being and character, to redeem and restore that which has been fractured and malformed. This work of redemption begins in the covenant which God makes with one man and the offspring that will come in succeeding generations. The intent of this covenant is clear. They are to receive the blessing of God and as a part of that blessing, God will form them into a nation. Yet this nation has a very particular and important purpose. In them, all of creation is to be blessed. God keeps God's promises. God lives up to the covenant God has made, but sadly the people and leaders of this new nation do not. And so again, out of the love and grace that is central to God's being and character, God begins the second act of this redemption story.

God sends into the world God's son who will become the Savior of all God's children. The birth of this Savior, the life he shared with his disciples and all those whom he encountered, the death that he endured, and the resurrection that was experienced in Jesus life, engaged the entire created order in three ways. First, Jesus was and is for us still today the fullest revelation of the love and grace that God has for the world. His life embodied in human form represents the fullness of God's grace and love, transmits that love in his life experience, and places it on full display in the act of offering himself as an atonement for the sins of all humankind. Second, the resurrection of Christ breaks the power of sin and death and offers to all who claim him as their Lord and Savior the opportunity to experience eternal life. In his death and resurrection, we find God, acting out of God's love and grace again, offering to us that which we could never receive on our own merits.

Finally, Jesus initiates the Kingdom of God and again speaks into being a new chapter in this overarching love story between God and that which God has brought into being. Jesus brings to life the church whose design is sharing this good news with the entire world, offering the invitation to become disciples of this risen king, and take up the cause of this coming kingdom. As a partner for this new community God again acts out of the love that is central to

God's being and brings a new part of God's self into relationship with God's created order. This new community is birthed at this critical moment as the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the hearts and lives of those who have enlisted themselves in this new divine conspiracy to reconcile and redeem all things.

God the Creator, God the Redeemer, God the Sustainer. This is where we find ourselves in this story today, and yet scripture points us to one more chapter that has yet to be played out within God's creation. God the victor will return to God's creation in final victory and glory to complete the work that has been initiated in Christ. It is on that day that the bride will be reunited with the bridegroom and the final resurrection and reconciliation of all things will come to full and final fruition.

In the same way that I understand God's grace interacting with all of creation as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, I believe that grace functions within the individual heart and life in a threefold way. God's grace is always at work in God's creation, but is understood by humanity as functioning in three different ways. The activity of God's love, grace, begins in what we call prevenient grace, which I understand to be the grace which draws us into relationship with God. This grace speaks into our heart and lives, testifying to the truth of God's love and inviting us to rediscover the God in whose image we were created. At that moment when prevenient grace has enveloped our life in such a way that our hearts are ready to respond in faith, God's second work of grace begins as we are justified by the merits of Christ's offering for us, we are accounted righteous before God, and the work of regenerating our hearts and lives in Christ begins. This grace we call justifying grace is wholly the work of God and is immediately present in the life of those who claim Christ as Lord and Savior of their lives. At that same time, God, out of God's mercy and grace, rolls up God's sleeves and begins the work of renewing in us God's image and purifying our heart and lives. This final form of grace we call sanctifying grace heals us our sin, binds up the woundedness of our hearts, and enables us by the power of the Holy Spirit to begin to live in a new and different way. That which is central to God's character and represents the primary essence of God's being begins to take root in our hearts, and as grace

grows, love begins to lead and hold authority of the life fully devoted to Christ. This is how I understand God's interaction with the human heart. God takes what was once created to be good, heals that which has been fractured by our nature and our sin, and enables us to live anew in the ways that reflects our original and perfect design.

This understanding of God as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer and the activity of God, grace at work in the human heart through prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace, form the foundational aspects of my theology. In the practice of ministry, they inform and shape my identity and my understanding of my vocation in the following ways.

First, I believe that all things were created for good, and in every life there is a goodness that longs to be set free. Each life is covered with God's fingerprints and embedded in the entire created order is evidence of the divine's imagination. Beneath the scars of our sin and the wounds we have suffered at the hands of an imperfect world living in rebellion against God, there is a memory of what our lives were originally intended to look like. Behind the restlessness we experience lies the sneaking suspicion that we were in fact meant for more than what life seems to offer. Within each of us, there is still a picture of Eden, and the work of God's prevenient grace adds color and depth and texture to that image. I believe that the longing and need present in every human heart is a direct result of that original image that has been distorted, but not completely forgotten. The church is a partner with God's grace, and every minister of the church, clergy and lay, are co-collaborators with Christ in revealing that which has been in each of us all along. In this regard, I believe that it is my constant task as a minister of the Gospel of Christ to work in partnership with the Holy Spirit in exposing the false narratives that have enslaved the human soul and revealing the truth about a God who loves the world, who created each of us in God's perfect image, and offers us the invitation to be set free.

Secondly, I believe that grace always precedes me in my life and ministry. In any and every circumstance, God's grace has beaten me to the hospital room, the living room, the court room, the place of worship, the Sunday School class, the staff meeting and every other place I find myself in my role as a pastor. It is God's grace that leads me, God's grace that precedes

me, and God's grace that succeeds any and all work I offer in service to Christ. In this sense, the acts of ministry belong to God and I am simply a participant in the overall work that God is doing in the world and in each human heart. I enter the pulpit with the sure conviction that God is already at work in the lives of those gathered in worship. I enter into a pastoral conversation with a young man, a married couple, a teenager or a senior citizen with the sure faith that God knows their hearts, their hopes, their needs, and their brokenness far better than I can ever imagine. This sharpens the focus I bring to the task of ministry, to find what God is doing, and join in that work. In those moments that seem like they might overwhelm me and words are hard to find my prayer is always this. "God, I know you are already speaking. Give me a sense of what you are already saying to this child of yours." This understanding of God's grace directs me in the relationships I seek to develop and foster with current and prospective members of the congregation, but it also leads me on a broader level as well. God has a vision for the church I serve. God has a vision for the community that church is called to serve. God has a vision for the world in which that community is located and that church seeks to bless. On all levels, I am bound by the conviction that the Spirit leads my life, my church and the steps we take together in service and mission to the local, regional and global community.

Next, that salvation is the both the gift of justifying grace and the work of sanctifying grace. It is a moment of great celebration when a new believer makes a commitment to Christ. Jesus told us that the angels rejoice when just one of the lost sheep come home. Each year I have served at Mansfield, I have had the distinct honor to help lead, alongside our entire pastoral staff, in the confirming of our confirmation class which often consists of 70-90 young people. I have had the privilege to baptize many of them, to preach at their service of confirmation, and to experience their lives born anew as they respond affirmatively to the question of their preparedness to take this sacred step. It is an awe-inspiring moment that brings tears to my eyes, and yet in the case of those young people and every life that receives the gift of justifying grace, I consistently remind them that the journey has just begun. Salvation is about God saving us, and I have yet to meet anyone who was finished being saved when

they made their first commitment to Christ. My reasoning for that statement is this. Saving to me implies healing, restoration, and renewal. This work does not take place simultaneously to the act of justification. It begins in that moment, but continues as God's sanctifying grace purifies us from the inside out and leads us in newness of life. It is the start of a long journey that recognizes that God's desire is bigger than getting us into heaven, but bringing the entire heavenly realm, the kingdom where God's dreams and aspirations reign, within our hearts and lives as well. As that takes place, God's kingdom expands in our world as the life fully devoted to Christ provides evidence of that work in mission and service to the entire world. The church should be ordered in such a way that the work of sanctifying grace is nurtured, encouraged, and celebrated in such a way that every member understands this critical component of Christian formation. I celebrate this as one of the most important and vital elements of our United Methodist heritage and theology, and I dare say that recapturing this emphasis and embedding it deep into our own lives and the life of our congregation is key to the renewal of our church. Humanity longs to be set free, and the promise of salvation is that this freedom can actually be found through the work of justifying and sanctifying grace.

Finally, I am directed by the conviction that Christ alone is the hope of the world. As I have put together this essay, I cannot help but think about how this process that I have described started in my own life and how it continues still today. I am also mindful of the many I have been privileged to serve who have touched my life and in some small way, I have been present in their lives when real change first began or when they were burdened by the need to take another step in their faith journey. When I think of them, I am often reminded of these words which the apostle Paul shared with the church at Philippi.

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or

defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.

God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

I think I have a sense of what Paul is expressing because the thought of those I have had the privilege to share life with leads me directly to that attitude of prayer and thanksgiving. I dearly love them, and I love the congregation I currently serve. Yet, Paul always brings me back to a key theological principle which is pregnant with meaning for all ministers of the gospel. Christ's love made manifest in our lives will lead us towards a deep and abiding love for the people we have been called to serve, and yet the intent of our lives is not to encourage them to love us back, but to fall in love with God and his son, Jesus who has opened up for us the doorway of everlasting life. I am not the hope of the world. Jesus is the hope of the world. I am not the hope of my congregation. Jesus is that hope. I am not anyone's Savior, including myself. Jesus is my hope and that is the hope that I share. In every moment of ministry, my role is to point to that hope, Jesus.

I am so grateful for the time that I have had to spend with Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, in the last year. Anyone who knows of the church Adam serves is aware of their amazing story, but what has really blessed my life is the opportunity to witness Adam's deep love for Christ and the fruits of God's grace that has been at work in him over the past twenty years as he has led his congregation. Adam's greatest gift to me was in re-introducing me to the Covenant Prayer, and the challenge he shared with the 50 pastors who participated in the Young Pastors Network to pray this prayer every day. Each time I do, I am captured again by its vision for my life and ministry. I will conclude with this familiar words as it contains my best hopes for my life and the kind of minister I hope to be.

*I am no longer my own, but thine.*

*Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.*

*Put me to doing, put me to suffering.*

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 1:3-8

*Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.*

*Let me be full, let me be empty.*

*Let me have all things, let me have nothing.*

*I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.*

*And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
thou art mine, and I am thine.*

*So be it.*

*And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
let it be ratified in heaven.*

*Amen.*