

NURTURE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND DISCIPLESHIP

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Experiences in Grace

One unique gift of Christian camps and retreat centers that other types of programs and centers rarely highlight are specific opportunities to learn from and practice the Christian path taught by Jesus. The word disciple means someone who seeks and incorporates the guidance of a teacher. Christian discipleship, then, refers specifically to a growing trust in Christ while learning to integrate Christian faith teachings as a way of life.

Camp and retreat ministry has an enduring reputation for frequently inspiring people to new levels of Christian discipleship. The church establishes our centers and experiences as a powerful avenue for the fulfillment of this very purpose. Without a doubt, camps and retreats offer unparalleled dynamics that contribute immensely to this sacred aspect of what we are about. First, people enter an environment apart from daily distractions as a time to focus more attentively on God. Second, guests and participants actually live together as a community for an extended period of time. This creates a very real potential for moving learning beyond typical classroom conversation to applying Christian faith and principles in our interactions and priorities as a temporary but intentional community of faith while at camp or on retreat.

Experiential learning or active learning draws people to move from concepts to practice, from spiritual thought to decision, from passiveness to action. Here people can explore what is possible if we commit to loving interdependence as a people of faith. A close partnership with local churches enables local leaders to understand what participants are learning about Christian Discipleship and community, so it can be reinforced and incorporated in a participant's return to an ongoing faith community where their growth in discipleship continues. True discipleship continues in other settings, and we never want to give the impression that camp or retreats are the only place discipleship happens. We don't want people living for a single week of camp or for the next retreat, we want them living for God.

Our United Methodist heritage gives prominence to God's grace. Grace is the love of God with every person and within every person. Our role as staff and volunteers might best be understood as preparing the way, so people can receive and participate in the grace of God (not simply talk about it). Although Divine grace surpasses definition, it refers to God's constant loving presence that, in the words of Bishop Rueben Job "is actively engaged for the good of all." (an excerpt from *A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader*).

This is the learning permeating all lessons. It is portrayed vividly through the life and teachings of Jesus. Christian Discipleship is about recognizing, receiving, and expanding our openness to be avenues of God's grace. Again, grace is God with us and within us that births love. Our settings and practices help people know they are loved. They learn to trust God at new levels. They are inspired and equipped to reach out to serve one another and the common good

of the wider world. John Wesley considered this activity of the Holy Spirit and our cooperation with it to be so central to existence and Christian Discipleship, that he invested his very life in helping people explore its meaning and its depths.

What are the implications for United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries? In his book, *A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader*, Bishop Reuben Job describes some of the mainstreams of grace as highlighted by Wesley.

Scriptural and Theological Exploration for Camp and Retreat Leaders

A. PROVIDE ENVIRONMENTS AND EXPERIENCES OF GENUINE GRACE

Prevenient (Preventing) Grace:

"No one is ever outside the reach of God's loving presence...Not only is it impossible to step outside God's gracious reach but God is always engaged on our behalf...It was the conviction of God's prevenient grace that led John Wesley to believe that everyone had within them this mark of divinity that could not be extinguished. God is active on our behalf and in our lives whether we recognize it or not...Most mature Christians look back at their lives and see that God has indeed "prevented" them from painful mistakes, kept them from unworthy goals, and guided them...even though they were unaware of God's nearness and intervention on their behalf...It was God who sought them out, wooed their attention, and called forth their love. It is this awakening call, this divine spirit within, this active involvement in all of life that is today called prevenient grace. And it is this unmerited action of God within and without that makes it possible for us to respond to God, know God, and walk in companionship with God. Each one of us in this very moment are experiencing the active involvement of God within our lives... Were God to withhold this grace, we would no longer be. It is this grace of God that calls forth our own response of love, faith and desire to walk with God in Christ." ¹

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A significant part of nurturing Christian discipleship through camp and retreat ministry involves very intentionally relating with each and every guest and camper in a way that reflects God's love for them and God's active participation in their welfare. It begins in the recognition that no one is outside the embrace of God. We are called to honor the divine spark within.

We do not withhold our love and respect until we feel others have earned it, recognized it, or until someone fully conforms to our expectations, because God does not withhold grace. God loves us first (prevenient meaning "comes before") and so we love, too, with the help of the Holy Spirit. Without a doubt, such a level of acceptance and genuine concern for the good of all is healing and

¹ *A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader* by Reuben P. Job (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1998) pp 108-109

helps persons to recognize God's companionship in ways that call forth responses of love, faith and a desire to walk with God.

Jesus embodied this wideness of grace and taught it to his disciples. Sometimes those we receive and support from both within and beyond the church may only come to a full awareness of God's presence at a later time when they recall the beauty of this kind of atmosphere and interaction. Our centers and we ourselves are meant to be a channel of God's prevenient grace, even among groups who may not be there specifically for faith formation purposes. It is part of the ministry of the United Methodist Church.

Of course, if we forget our primary purpose we will likely fail to be a people and place of grace, which could damage our participants, guests and staff along with their relationship with God. Remember, their expectations may be higher because they know we are the church. It is vital to be ever cognizant of who and whose we are as a Christian camp and retreat ministry and to humbly cherish it. Our own relationship with God and our attentiveness to that primary relationship matters, because the kinds of settings we are trying to cultivate are characterized by the "Fruit of the Spirit" not the "fruit of our own making." Our capacity to love increases with our growing connection with God. Thankfully, God continues to nurture a relationship with us and with those we serve, even when we falter. Like those we host, we are blessed to be recipients of grace ourselves.

Galatians 5:22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things... 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

John 1: 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a parent's only son, full of grace and truth. ...16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

1 John 4: 19 We love because God first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Matthew 9: 10 And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

B. ENCOURAGE A GROWING TRUST IN GOD AND DECISIONS OF FAITH

Justifying Grace:

"...John Wesley, grounded as he was in the Bible, was certain that salvation was not for sale...he (Wesley) was taught, and early in his life believed, that the way to salvation (abiding in God's presence and receiving wholeness of life now and after death), was to be found in a high morality and an abundance of good works. After all, these were, and still are, expected marks of a Christian. But he soon learned that this was an inadequate foundation for Christian theology and for the Christian life. If we were required to earn our way to God, we were without hope... We can never justify ourselves, be reconciled to

*God, or earn our way... But the marvelous good news is that God offers it all to us as a gift. We are saved, in this world and the next, by grace through faith.”*²

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While Prevenient Grace highlights God’s active care and love even when a person may not be aware of it or does not recognize it to be the Creator’s embrace, Justifying Grace involves the continuing communication of the Holy Spirit with our spirit until we realize God’s presence in our lives. This recognition invites a response, our movement toward and choices to embrace God. Oneness with God develops in the fertile soil of an abiding trust in God.

The Apostle Paul and John Wesley make it clear that we cannot attain our own present and future with the Giver of Life through unwavering adherence to doing what is right and good. Ultimately, this is futile because we are not God. Such an approach trades a relationship with the Divine with a life of striving to gain what is already available as a gift. In a real way, the idea that we earn our connection with God by racking up a score card of good works is a form of rejection of God as much as a person who doesn’t care about a relationship with God. In both cases, the need for God is denied. The essence of Christian discipleship is faith – trust in God.

A more abundant life emerges when a person knows that he or she is loved by Christ and chooses greater openness to that love, to participate with God in that love, and to extend that love. The interplay of such a synergistic relationship awakens a multitude of life-giving possibilities that otherwise remain dormant. Christian discipleship, then, incorporates deliberate decisions and choices that express themselves in an expanding confidence in God and in following the way of Jesus.

The Bible, including stories of Jesus’ interaction with those he encountered, highlight many illustrations of decisions of faith. The variety of forms utilized by Jesus in inviting persons to affirmations of faith or in identifying decisions and actions as examples of faith is instructional for how we understand decisions of faith. Decisions that confirm trust in God cannot be reduced to a one size fits all formula, a single decision, or the rote affirmation of a static set of preconceived questions that ignore context and experience. These decisions run the gamut from Peter’s affirmation that Jesus was the Christ, to the woman who reached out to touch Jesus’ garment, to the Centurion who trusted that Jesus could heal his daughter, to Abraham and Sarah’s willingness to leave their home to travel to a new land, to Hagar’s crying out to God on behalf of her son, to Zacchaeus who was happy to welcome Jesus to his home and in repentance and joy committed to give half of his wealth away, to the widow who gave out of her

² *A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader* by Reuben P. Job (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1998) pp 155-156

poverty, to Mary who humbly became a Godbearer, to Jesus who dedicated himself to God's will, etc.

Nurturing Christian discipleship means offering concrete opportunities that allow people to consider the enormous love that God has for them and for others in a wide diversity of ways. It is a process that connects with their own life experience, the experiences of the group at the camp or retreat center, and their future experiences wherever life may lead them. This connection helps establish links of that abiding presence of God in the world and their own lives as ongoing, not just encapsulated in a single moment. This recognition encourages them to trust the Life Giver at new levels, which carry meaning beyond the camp and retreat experience. Here, too, we are reminded once more to make sure we help persons connect with an ongoing community of faith that will build upon decisions of faith through a life long growth in discipleship. Nurturing Christian discipleship is the mission of the whole church not just Christian camp and retreat centers.

Of course an individual's response to these invitations is something that we do not control. Remember the Rich Young Ruler who did not respond to Jesus' encouragement to enter a deeper level of discipleship. The attempt to force our desires that people follow Christ, no matter how heartfelt our desires may be, is different from collaborating with the Holy Spirit. We plant seeds and nurture them but cannot demand their growth. Unfortunately, heavy handedness can lead to milieus and approaches spiced with fear and impending doom, pressure to comply, and thinly veiled rejection of those who hesitate. Such approaches can be particularly disturbing to children, especially those away from home and susceptible to peer pressure. Motivations for reaching out to God such as fear, peer pressure, wanting to please your leader, and so on are typically short lived. Faith, hope and love are what abide when it comes to cultivating Christian discipleship and life-long learners under the tutelage of Jesus.

The desire to avoid negative approaches to inspiring decisions of faith sometimes paralyzes leaders and no invitations to deeper faith and Christian discipleship occur at all. Lots of activities may happen, but instead of them being avenues for greater faith there can be a complete disconnect. People have fun and learn new things, but they may not grow closer to God at all. This is equally detrimental to our purpose. The Camp and Retreat experience opens people to new possibilities, because they are not bound by their normal routine and roles. This openness includes the possibility of a deepening connection with God and decisions to base their lives more fully on the love of Christ. Camp and Retreat ministries should be invitational – extending invitations for people to recognize and receive the love of Christ and to be shaped by that love. This is an important aspect of Christian camp and retreat ministries, which can be done in ways that do not manipulate but instead invite a response that are age level appropriate and not coercive.

Tangible commitments to God and growing in love are important mileposts on the Christian journey. Camp and Retreat experiences can be one place where these pivotal milestones occur. With no focus on this dimension of discipleship our centers really have little to offer that is not already being offered

by other worthwhile groups and activities in the general society. We don't want to be redundant. We want to offer the abundance of this particular spiritual path that is a gift God has given us to pass on to nourish the wider world. It is vital not to hide our identity as Christian camp and retreat ministries, as if this will make us more acceptable to the wide diversity of people who travel to our centers, or that denying our faith somehow honors other faiths. What people honestly seek from us is respect, appreciation and genuine grace not the denial of our identity or mission. How disappointing it will be even for people of other faiths to come to Christian camp and retreat centers only to see little to no evidence of it. It would be like going to a Buddhist Monastery only to discover that they decided to no longer teach meditation or to live their practices because they are afraid a few people may not appreciate it. This fear is unwarranted and absurd compared to the power of living deeply and graciously from the core of our faith and identity. Genuine love will draw people not offend them.

Christian hospitality ministries can be seen as continual ministries of prevenient grace. There will be persons among all groups both religious and secular who will, also, hunger for the opportunity to explore Christian faith and practice more deeply in ways that reflect justifying grace. We are most effective when our staff and volunteers are prepared to offer both, through teachable moments and planned activities.

Matthew 4: 18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. **19** And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." **20** Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Matthew 9: 20 Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, **21** for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." **22** Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well."

Romans 10: 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. **13** For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." **14** 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?

Galatians 3: 11 Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Ephesians 3: 16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, **17** and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. **18** I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, **19** and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Luke 19: 5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." **6** So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. **7** All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." **8** Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look,

half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." 9 Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a child of Abraham.

Luke 6: 36 Be merciful, just as your Maker is merciful. 37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you.

C. INSPIRE PEOPLE TO OPEN THEMSELVES TO GOD'S TRANSFORMATION OF MIND AND RELATIONSHIPS

Sanctifying Grace:

"Can we live a life of goodness, holiness on our own? The thriving business of self-help books and programs suggests we can. Some believe that if we are wise enough, tough enough, persistent enough, and try just a little harder we can do it all on our own. John Wesley believed that it was impossible without the help of God...It is God's sanctifying grace at work within us that leads to transformation. It is the inner life that must be changed if the outer life is to be changed. The desire for this transformation, as the transformation itself, is God at work within us...Wesley believed that the new birth was more than forgiveness and assurance. It involved going on toward perfection (in love)... The temptations and opportunities to be less than Christ-like surround us daily. However, the grace to be more than we are is even closer. It is God's work of transformation within, and it is offered to everyone. ³

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Christian Discipleship ultimately calls forth lives that embody the love of God more and more. This involves many transformations of thought and action. Sanctifying grace refers to making our lives more sacred, holy and Christ-like, which is a life-long process of responsiveness to God's caring desire for our lives and the world. In contrast to the attempt to be a good person to prove our worth or our ability to surpass others, we are moved by the Spirit to love out of joy, thankfulness and recognition that we are already cherished in the heart of God, and so are all human beings, and so is the entire creation. Loving God, loving ourselves, and loving our neighbors is a way of life that emanates from Christian discipleship. Our cooperation with true love, which is not always easy to discern or apply, is our worship of God and our participation in what God is doing in the world. It provides ultimate meaning in life. If we are to participate fully in nurturing Christian Discipleship among those we host and serve, then it is critical to engage people in what our United Methodist heritage has called "acts of piety" and "acts of mercy".

³ A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader by Reuben P. Job (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1998), pp 185-186

Sanctifying grace is about actively participating so that our hearts and our lives more fully reflect the image of Christ or, said in another way, the love of God. Acts of piety, in modern terms, might be called "Seeking Closeness with God". This includes recognizing when we fail to love, to repent and to resume the path of love. Acts of mercy, in modern terms, might be called "Living Lives of Christian Love". John Wesley, identified a number of practices or holy habits provided by God that help people experience transformation of heart, mind and action by aiding us to draw near to God and to embrace love as a way of being.

These avenues can be powerful if we are genuine in seeking God and God's direction through their practice. Seeking Closeness with God includes habits like regular prayer, worship, seeking inspiration through scripture, Christian conversation with others, fasting, participating in Holy Communion, etc. Wesley encouraged the practices of doing good and avoiding harm as ways the Holy Spirit often uses to transform our hearts and lives, if we are genuine in our intention to grow in love and are not doing it for other less healthy motives. Nurturing Christian discipleship incorporates these active practices into the experiences offered during camp and retreat experiences. Not these alone, but also through other practices and experiences that draw people to reflect upon God and be involved in what God desires for the world.

As Bishop Job reminds us, there are many ways God may choose to nurture our souls and inspire our goodness.

*God may choose to come to us, save us, provide for us, and hold us close...in any way God chooses. We cannot control the ways or means that God will choose to use in our transformation...However, we can choose to utilize those means of grace that have consistently been used by God to draw persons toward goodness and God..."*⁴

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Mark 7: 17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. **18** He said to them, "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, **19** since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) **20** And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. **21** For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, **22** adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. **23** All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Luke 4: 16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, **17** and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: **18** "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, **19** to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." **20** And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all

⁴ *A Wesleyan Spiritual Reader* by Reuben P. Job (Abingdon Press: Nashville, Tn, 1998) , pp 91-92

in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Romans 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect. 3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

Luke 6: 45 The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. 46 "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? 47 I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. 48 That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49 But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house."

Ephesians 2: 10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

1 Peter 4: 8 Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaining. 10 Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. 11 Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

3 John 1: 11 Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.

Jeremiah 29: 11 For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. 12 Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. 13 When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart...

Matthew 14: 22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

Acts 12: 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. 4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

1 Thessalonians 5: 15 See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless

at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.