

August 30, 2015



“Five Marks of a Methodist: REJOICE IN GOD”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Matthew 5: 1-11

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Today’s sermon in our series, The Marks of a Methodist, looks at the second mark, or characteristic, that John Wesley listed as defining what makes a Methodist a Methodist. The first—A Methodist Loves God. The second—A Methodist Rejoices in God.

So, in that spirit, let’s begin with the ancient greeting of the church:

This is the day that the Lord has made.

LET US REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN IT!

John Wesley had hinted at this already in the First Mark. Remember how it went? “What then is the mark? Who is a Methodist, according to your own account?” {Wesley wrote:} “I answer: A Methodist is one who has “the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;” one who “loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength. *God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul;* which is constantly crying out, “Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee! My God and my all! Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!”

Second mark of a Methodist—a Methodist rejoices in God.

Now, before we go any further with all this, I need to clarify something that I probably should have said last Sunday. Several of you asked, so here goes. In describing what he called “the marks of a Methodist,” or the character or qualities of Methodist, Wesley was NOT saying—here’s what makes a Methodist *better than* OR *different from* all other Christians. He wasn’t saying “a Methodist is such-and-so, but a Presbyterian is not. Or a Lutheran is not. Or a Catholic is not.....He wasn’t defining his new Methodists over and against other Christians, as if we’re better than they.

He understood these marks as the signposts of a life of discipleship, lived in relation to the scriptural principles and practices that all Christians have followed since the time of Jesus. In fact, if you know your history, he didn’t set out, at first anyway, to form a new denomination at all. His was a renewal movement. He was pushing the Christians of his day to go deeper, to have more than a passing relationship with God, to be Christ’s disciples in more than name only.

And so, he was saying, here’s how *we “Methodists”* are striving to do just that, by emphasizing these principles and spiritual practices. We know that the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit and in return, we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. God is the joy of our hearts and the desire of our souls.

Wesley was witnessing to all Christians his understanding and his experience of how we all stay alive to God and in God. It’s important to note here, though himself a scholar, a learned man with an interest in many things expanding far beyond theology including medicine and the brand new field of electricity, Wesley was not so interested in “right thinking.” The Methodist movement was not about parsing ideas or theological positions. It was about right living, praying, and spiritual disciplines.

He wrote: “The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point... But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.”

So in this Fall Kick-Off season, as you’re getting your fall schedules in place, getting back to church, inviting friends or neighbors to join you, or dropping by the Newcomer Mingle this morning, remember—being a Methodist is not about being better than our other brothers and sisters in Christ. It’s an invitation into a life of faith that is life-giving, grounded in the love of God, and full of joy.

This is the day that the Lord hath made.

LET US REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN IT.

Here’s how Wesley put it: “[A Methodist] is therefore happy in God, yea, always happy, as having in him “a well of water springing up into everlasting life,” and overflowing his soul with peace and joy. “Perfect love” having now “cast out fear,” he “rejoices evermore.”

Now this isn’t necessarily happy-clappy faith. It can be at times, of course. Like last Sunday when Tricia asked the children if they should always love their brother or sister and one little smart-aleck blurted out “NOOOOOO!” We all got a good laugh from that one. And that’s part of life in the community of faith. Laughter, smiles, fun, good times, like we’re looking forward to at our Fall Kick-Off barbeque in a couple weeks.

Wesley was pointing us to something deeper, a deep and abiding assurance of God’s love, God’s presence in our lives, God’s care for us, God’s gift of everlasting life, God’s love that casts out fear. Second mark of a Methodist: A Methodist rejoices in God. “[A

Methodist] is therefore happy in God, yea, always happy, as having in him "a well of water springing up into everlasting life," and overflowing his soul with peace and joy. "Perfect love" having now "cast out fear," he "rejoices evermore."

As I mentioned, John Wesley was a learned man, trained in the classics. He used the word "happy" in its root meaning in the Greek to describe this joy in God's love in the way we heard it this morning in the reading of the Beatitudes. "Happiness" in this sense is deeply ethical. It is a mark of character. It means the harvest of a life given over to righteousness, rooted and grounded in the love of God.

I saw this kind of holy joy many years ago the first time I was privileged to hear Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa preach. As I recall, it was before the end of apartheid in South Africa, before the election of Nelson Mandela as president. Archbishop Tutu, of course, had been a vocal proponent of freedom and justice.

What suffering and oppression he had seen! And yet, as the processional hymn began, there he was, literally dancing up the aisle, singing, smiling—this is the joy of the Lord to which Wesley is pointing. It's the joy of which the prophet Nehemiah wrote: "Don't be sad, because the joy from the Lord is your strength." (Neh. 8:10)

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LET US REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN IT!

Quite frankly, I've seen this kind of joy in many of you as well. You are my and our teachers in what it means to be a Methodist who rejoices in God. I've seen your stubborn insistence on remaining in love with God through very painful and challenging circumstances. Through the vicissitudes of life, illness, aging, loss...it is a choice to stay grounded in the love and joy of God.

I've seen and heard it from our work teams, youth and adults. Whether in Haiti or New Orleans or Appalachia, you come back from experiences of back-breaking work in difficult conditions, hot, sweaty, dirty, bone-tired, and what do you talk about? The joy of it all—the people you met, the houses you restored, the worship you shared, the beauty you saw, the hope you found....The second mark of a Methodist—a Methodist rejoices in God.

In the last couple weeks, our nation has seen a profound witness to this kind of joy in former President Jimmy Carter. At age 90, diagnosed with cancer found in his brain and they're not sure where else it might be in his body, starting radiation treatments, what does he do? He gives a frank and straightforward news conference about it, says he might have to cut back on some of his activities to focus on his treatment, and shows up to again teach the Sunday School class he's taught for over 70 years. Reportedly exhibiting his "easy-going humor and toothy smile," he taught the class twice last Sunday because so many people showed up for it. He spent about five minutes recapping his illness, said "That's enough of that," and went on to talk about God, faith, love, and relationships. "Consider God your partner through life," he said. "...Jesus came and stretched the boundaries of the definition of God's love beyond what anybody had ever imagined," he said.

Afterwards, he stayed around awhile for photos, asking people to come up in groups. "If you come by yourself, I won't say anything, but I'll wonder why you don't have any friends," he quipped, drawing a burst of laughter from the crowd.

His approach to his illness and treatment comes out of a life-time of living into his faith. It goes deep. He once said: "The stronger the ties that bind us to God, the more likely we are to live, react, and behave in harmony with...greater joy, peace and happiness."

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LET US REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN IT!

Happiness, joy-- the harvest of a life given over to righteousness, rooted and grounded in the love of God. *The harvest of a life...*this we see in two non-Methodists let me point out—the Anglican Archbishop Tutu and the Baptist layman, Jimmy Carter. The harvest of a life---we catch glimpses of it in one another, this beautiful joy that flows back from the love of God poured into our hearts. Heart-to-heart. Life-to-life. This is the second mark of a Methodist.

And so we sing, with Charles Wesley:
Rejoice, the Lord is King!
Your Lord and King adore;
Rejoice, give thanks, and sing,
And triumph evermore;
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice;
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Notes:

Series based on Steve Harper's [Five Marks of a Methodist: The Fruit of a Living Faith](#).
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015.

John Wesley. "The Character of a Methodist." <http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/The-Wesleys-and-Their-Times/The-Character-of-a-Methodist>

"Jimmy Carter Focuses on Faith..." Dave Urbanski, [The Blaze](#), Aug. 23, 2015.
Charles Wesley: "Rejoice the Lord is King." 1746. UMH #715

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