

September 6, 2015



## “Five Marks of a Methodist: A METHODIST GIVES THANKS”

Homily by Rev. Robert English

Mark 14:22-25

*While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’*

Today is the third week in our series “The 5 Marks of a Methodist.” The first mark we explored was a Methodist Loves God. For John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, it always, always, always starts with and ends with love. John Wesley believed that the engine that drives this universe, the force that is constantly at work in our world and in our lives is the unmerited, unconditional love of God which prompts in our hearts our love for God and for one another.

The second mark we explored is a Methodist Rejoices in God. As we experience the love which God has for us, it sparks a fire of love within our bones as it fills us with unimaginable joy; the joy that causes us to laugh, to sing, to dance like nobody's watching. This overflowing joy we experience in a community of faith that is deep and wide and wondrous and fills us with life and life made new.

Today, we take a moment to explore the third mark of a Methodist, A Methodist Gives Thanks. And today there is so much to be thankful for, is there not?

With gratitude we celebrate the baptism of Samantha Mercy as we welcome this beloved child of God into the family of faith, the church. We affirm, with joy, that God's love surrounds her, embraces her and we are filled with gratitude for the gift of her life and because in her precious face we see, reflected for us, the image of the divine. And we give thanks because gratitude is the only appropriate response to grace.

John Wesley advocated that the people called Methodist, those who commit themselves to living the Christian walk in this particular way, should strive to be people who **give thanks at all times and in all circumstances**. He believed that this should be part of our spiritual practice always giving thanks at all times and in all circumstances.

### **Now this is much easier said than done, is it not?**

It seems easy to be filled with gratitude when things are going well, when you're riding a wave of momentum, those seasons of your life when you feel like you can do no wrong, and everything you touch somehow turns to gold.

### **Life is good, health is good, family is good, finances are good.**

When everything is going right, it seems so easy to take a step back and to say thank you, thank you, thank you. And yet, sometimes, if you don't guard your heart, if you don't practice gratitude, you might give into the temptation to start to feel a little too big for your britches; you might give into the temptation to feel a little bit too entitled and as though you deserve all of this and so much more. If you don't guard your heart, if you don't practice gratitude, then sometimes you start to lose sight of this fundamental spiritual truth to all existence, this thing you call your life is a gift, a gift of God's grace.

A Methodist, a follower of Jesus, gives thanks as a way to practice humility, a way to reframe all that we are and all that we have through the lens of our relationship with a loving God.

Now, there are some challenges in giving thanks when things are going well, like challenge of human ego, but, you might be thinking to yourself, there are far larger challenges for us to give thanks when things are NOT going well.

It may seem as though the practice of giving thanks at all times and in all circumstances negates or is oblivious to that fact that we experience true pain and suffering in our lives. As though it is numb to the fact that directly or indirectly at some point we will walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

How are we to give thanks at all times and in all circumstance when our parent is diagnosed with cancer, when we are in the middle of a long and drawn out divorce, when our sibling loses their job, when our child gets bullied at school? When life is tough, real, and raw.

### **How are we to experience gratitude in all of that?**

I think that we all know it is not easy. And truth be told, sometimes I think to myself “how do people actually do it?” And yet, I've seen it lived out in the lives of the saints, both you who are living among us and those who have gone on in the faith; an unbelievable gratitude in the midst of circumstances that are beyond comprehension.

Folks, ordinary everyday amazing kind of people, who remain connected with gratitude in their hearts to the One who is in the midst of all things.

And the thing that I've noticed about all those folks who have this deep profound gratitude in their bones is that they have cultivated this over a life time of prayer and discipleship. They have grown to know more and more, not just in their head but in their heart that God is love, and that we abide in that love in each and every moment. They have come to know more and more that there is nothing that we can experience in this life that is apart from God.

Theirs is **not** a theology of God rooted in a naive sheltered experience of the world.

Their gratitude does not come without sorrows, or hurts and the scars that they bear. No, it honors the entirety of life, it takes account of all that we experience in this world, it touches every moment no matter how painful or how beautiful and it affirms that God has graced it all with God's loving presence.

When we give thanks we remember that God is here and God loves us. When we give thanks we remember God bear our pain alongside us, God rejoices with us, we remember God laughs when we laugh, God cries when we cry, God even enters into death with us and for us so we can know the fullness of God's abundant life. We are Methodists which means we believe there is a method to the madness, the madness of life of faith. John Wesley at times was criticized for being so meticulous and methodical in his approach to living the Christian walk. But, hey, here we are all these generations later still claiming there is truth to this way of being Christian. So here is something practical for you to take with you this week, from John Wesley's own life of prayer, for you to incorporate into your own spiritual practice.

Every day of the week, Wesley's prayer life focused on how he could grow in his love for God and his love for his neighbor, except for one day. As Steve Harper recounts in his book *Five Marks of a Methodist: On Saturday night John Wesley would take time in prayer to recognize "that his life had been lived in relation to God's grace in both big and small ways. He used each Saturday to look back upon the week just lived, to note God's providences and to express his gratitude for them."*

We believe God is with us, we believe that God is for us because God loves us before we are known or loved by anyone else. We experience this love in both big and small ways. Take this practice with you, this week, this month or for the rest of the year. I encourage you to take one day and look back at your week and notice where you have seen God's grace at work in both big and small ways and say thank you, thank you.

It will change your heart. It will change your outlook. It will open your eyes and ears to the sacred wonders of this life. You will start to see God's grace everywhere and in everything and even in everyone. You will start to notice all of the thousands of things that go right each and every day instead of always focusing on the one or two or three things that went wrong.

Like Wesley, and more importantly, like Jesus, your life will become as Harper put it, "a life of prayer which climaxes with a response of gratitude."

This morning, at the center of our worship, we can touch and taste this response of gratitude. As we gather around this table of love, relationship, and communion which Jesus himself graces every time we celebrate and we remember that even in the face of dire circumstance, certain death, abandonment and darkness, he invited his disciples to share a meal with him and he took simple elements and infused them with his life-giving love. And in the middle of the meal, he lifted high the cup of forgiveness and grace, poured out for you, for me, for us all, and as he did this he gave thanks. As we prepare to receive this sacrament let us do the same-

Thanks be to God, Amen.

Notes:

Series based on Steve Harper's *Five Marks of a Methodist: The Fruit of a Living Faith*.  
Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015.

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