

September 13, 2015



“Five Marks of a Methodist: A METHODIST PRAYS ALWAYS”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

1 Thessalonians 5:12-19

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.

Kick-off Sunday is increasingly hard to schedule. Football has already started. School has already started. And the weather makes it feel like summer will never end. So where are we? That may not be perfectly clear, but I can tell you that the stores are already stocked for Halloween and there are only 102 shopping days left until Christmas. You have been warned!

So I'm not sure where that leaves us, but it's clear that it's a great day for a party, for this opportunity to praise God together, and to offer a prayer that God will stay at the center of our lives and guide us through all that may come.

Fourth mark of a Methodist—a Methodist prays constantly. You'll remember we started with a Methodist loves God. A Methodist rejoices in God. A Methodist gives thanks. And a Methodist prays constantly. Prayer is our response to God, to the prior movement of the Holy Spirit in us. From love to rejoicing to giving thanks---we respond in prayer. God is alive in us, real in us. Prayer means paying attention, listening for that presence of God already in us and then letting what we hear, what we know, what we come to trust, through prayer, define and shape all of who we are. A Methodist prays constantly.

In this congregation, we start young and we pray until we're so old that we finally give the last word over to God as we enter the eternal house of prayer we call heaven. We pray constantly, our whole life long. You know, our Preschool started two weeks ago. One of our Preschool moms brought her little daughter to school on the first day, her first day in school. She jumped right in, happy as a clam. Her mom told me this week that her daughter sat down at dinner the other night, folded her hands in front of her, bowed her head and closed her eyes, and sang a little prayer song she'd already learned at school.

Each Sunday, the children gather up here on the steps and what do we do before we bless them on their way to Sunday School? We pray--with them--bringing them into the life of the congregation at prayer that will help form and shape them as they grow.

They'll pray their way through Preschool and Sunday School, and Confirmation, and youth group and youth chapel and youth mission teams. And wherever their life path takes them, they will be rooted and grounded in a living relationship with God that over time moves from prayers they learn, and prayers they pray with others, to their own authentic conversation with God that can continue their whole life long. Sometimes in the background, sometimes in the foreground. Sometimes crystal clear, sometimes managing only fuzzy connection. Expressed at church or on the beach, or at the birth of a child, or the death of a parent. Uttered in panic in the doctor's office or sung out in joy at the birth of a grandchild....prayer becomes our constant dialogue with God. A Methodist prays constantly.

You know, the only right way to pray is to just do it. John Wesley taught us to pray using all and every kind of prayer—“public, private, mental, vocal. Do not be diligent in one kind of prayer and negligent in the others—let us use all.”

Sometimes people tell me they don't know how to pray or what to pray. Wesley helps us here with some reminders. Sometimes when we feel we can't pray ourselves, we need simply join the congregation, come to worship, and let the prayers we hear and say and sing together in this sacred time carry us through mute seasons in our own hearts.

Sometimes it helps to share our prayer needs with others—a close friend, a pastor, our Prayer Chain, by making a Prayer Request on our webpage, or through our Prayer Quilt ministry. I hope you will always feel welcome to fill out a prayer card, or request a prayer quilt, or stop by our Chapel on Sunday or during the week for a time of prayer.

Sometimes we are helped by God's Word and the prayers of God's faithful, searching, honest people across the generations. I sometimes suggest that people who are stuck, or blocked by anger or confusion or fear, I suggest they simply turn to the Psalms, open it up and start reading, letting all the different kinds of prayer contained in those oldest of hymns give voice to all the emotions they have stored up inside.

One of the reasons God gathers us into congregations is so that we are not left alone in this journey. The more you get to know folks around here, the more you'll find that there are some powerful pray-ers in this bunch. Folks who've persevered through untold challenges and heartache. Folks who've been at it for a long time. Folks who seem to be able to simply close their eyes and transport themselves into the presence of God. Surround yourself with people like these. Get to know them. They are there for you whenever you need them. In fact, they're probably praying for you even when you don't know it. I know they're praying for me, and for this congregation, and for God's church and God's people. And as you grow in the life of prayer, your prayers, too, will expand beyond your own needs and longings to encompass others as well.

And sometimes to pray, we just need to be quiet. We need to sit in silence and empty our thoughts. We need to let go of all the things that get in the way of an actual relationship with God and get really zen about. We need to empty our minds, silence our chatter, and listen, listen, listen...."Be still and know that I am God," the psalmist whispered. We need to "listen with the ear of our heart" as St. Benedict said. And in the silence, God's love will draw forth our prayer. Because, bottom line, it's all about the indisputable fact that God loves you—who you have been, who you are, and who you are yet to become. And there is nothing, in heaven or on earth, more healing, more comforting, more freeing than that.

That's where we started with the first mark, remember? A Methodist is one who has the love of God *poured into our hearts* through the Holy Spirit who has been aiven to us.

There you have it—love, rejoice, give thanks, pray.

A few years ago, I shared with you from what we might call a "primer on prayer" by Anne Lamott who has a wonderful way of putting things into plain English. I want to reprise it this morning because I know that, even after all this, there will be some folks out there thinking: "this is all well and good, but I didn't learn to pray in Preschool, my family didn't pray, and I still don't really get it." But I'd like to.

Anne Lamott boils it down to three simple words: "Help, Thanks, Wow." If you don't remember anything else today, remember this: "Help, Thanks, Wow."

She says that these three words are really the only three we need to know in order to pray. HELP...for myself, my family, my friends....for our community, nation and world. When we reach bottom or the end of our rope, or just don't know how to cope, or when something as devastating as a hurricane washes over our world or our lives and turns everything inside out, then we cry out or whisper "help." And then we will sense the loving, listening ear of God. We will experience the help that comes from those all around us reaching out in love and concern, giving of themselves to help.

She goes on to describe what happens next. In time, we are overcome with gratitude and we say THANKS. We give thanks. And our hearts will turn from desperation and despair to new life and hope. Thanks.

The WOW part really frames it all--the awe and gratitude we feel for creation, for those who love and befriend us, for the amazing grace that holds us and lifts us up and allows us to glimpse a future not of our own making.

As she puts it: "Wow is the praise prayer. The prayer where we're finally speechless... When I don't know what else to do, I go outside, and I see the sky and the trees and a bird flies by, and my mouth drops open again with wonder at the just sheer beauty of creation. And I say, 'Wow.' ...You say it when you see the fjords for the first time at dawn, or you say it when you first see the new baby, and you say, 'Wow. This is great.' Wow is the prayer of wonder."

And that's the word for this day—wow. A day to wow at 53 backpacks sent to make all the difference to a bunch of kids' year at school. A day to wow at the God who is with us wherever we go. A day to wow at each other around a great barbeque. A day to wow at the gift of a new year full of opportunities and blessings. A day to wow in constant prayer with a God who loves us, is close to us, and gives us life. A day for a wow kick-off to a great year of prayer and praise.

A Methodist loves God, rejoices in God, gives thanks, prays constantly, AND...coming next week...loves others. Because the love that is poured into our hearts and fills us with joy and gratitude and pulls us into relationship with God in prayer is the love that flows out to all others and to the whole creation. May God wow us this day with the joy and power of this holy love.

Amen.

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>

Anne Lamott's [Help, Thanks, Wow: Three Essential Prayers.](#) Riverhead, 2012

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