

September 20, 2015



“Five Marks of a Methodist: A METHODIST LOVES OTHERS”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

Today we conclude our sermon series the 5 marks of a Methodist with John Wesley’s final mark, ‘A Methodist Loves Others.’ This is the crescendo to our exploration of what it means to live as a Wesleyan Christian, a Methodist who follows in the way of Jesus. In today’s gospel reading, we hear Jesus give us what is sometimes called the greatest commandment, the cornerstone of our faith, something that we teach children, youth and adults of all ages; that we are called to love God with all we have and all we are, and to love others, our neighbors, as we love ourselves.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was a wise, savvy and practical pastor and theologian who knew just how hard this commandment, this practice can be for us. So much so, that in his treatise on the 5 Marks of a Methodist he spent most of his time elaborating on this last mark, this last practice, this last commandment, a Methodist Loves Others.

Now, we talk a lot about love here in our church, in sermons, in prayer, in children’s messages, at Sunday school, and youth group. It is the foundation of our theology, one of our foci statements, God is love. All 5 Marks of a Methodist are an attempt to faithfully respond to this foundational belief that God is love and this love is real and available for every one of us at each and every moment, before each and after breath. The first four Marks of a Methodist focus on our inner experience of this unbounded love. A Methodist responds by Loving God, Rejoicing in God, Giving Thanks and Constantly Praying. Each of these acts is a faithful response to God which fills us up more and more to enables us to know God’s love in our life.

But, like I said just a moment ago, John Wesley, just as Jesus before him, was wise, savvy and practical. Wesley, like Jesus, knew that without this last mark, loving others, we might become stuck in our life of faith. See the first four marks of a Methodist have a tendency to be more about us as individuals and our personal relationship with God.

They are things that fill up our spiritual tank, so to speak, they fill us with life and happiness and gratitude, which are all good things, and yet, however, left on our own, we might get stuck in a rut of spiritual narcissism or spiritual consumerism. We might be tempted to create this false notion that God is someone who is here just to fill us up, to meet our needs, almost as if God is our spiritual vending machine. Hmmm, what do I need today, put in my money, press the right button and boom, pure personal joy and a snickers bar.

If we are stuck in this mode, we wind up asking ourselves questions like, well what is in it for me? What do I get out of this? How will this fill me up? Jesus knew this all too well when he handed us this teaching, the greatest of all the commandments: the first is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. He gives it to us as a whole package, these two commandments intricately tied to one another, so you can’t truly have one without the other. In fact if you listened closely to the story this morning Jesus was asked by a religious lawyer, what is the greatest commandment, singular commandment, which is the one we should all be following no matter what. Jesus’ answer is to give us two commandments, he asks us to live by two guiding principles which shape our life and our life together, love God and love others.

John Wesley picked up on this in his teaching on the 5 marks of a Methodist by starting with loving God and ending with loving others. See all of the Marks in between work together within the life of those who practice them to help us grow in our love for God and our love for neighbor. As Steve Harper puts it in his book on these marks of a methodist, the first four marks are intended to nourish us in order to help us to love others in Jesus’ name. These four marks fills us up so that we can be poured out in love for others.

And in order to really enact this commandment, to make it part of our life, we so desperately need God’s grace, we need God’s unconditional love to seep into our lives, because, I don’t know about you, but left to my own will and my own ego, my love has a tendency to become far too conditional. If it is not rooted in God’s

unconditional grace and overflowing love, my love tends to be far too fickle, inconsistent, scarce; reserved only for those in my life who earn it or deserve it.

Maybe, if you are like me, you are really, really good at loving people who love you back, people who shower you with affirmations, people who respect you, admire you, or agree with you.

Loving others is easy, at least easier, when the others look like us, speak the same language, have the similar background, root for the right team, Dallas Cowboys by the way, vote the right way, worship the right way, people who have what we have and covet what we covet.

And, apart from God's grace, it is too easy to let ourselves get in the way of this commandment to love others and our lives become more and more about our limited love and less and less about God's limitless love. Because God's radical love is lavished on all of us unconditionally, before we ask for it, recognize the need for it, before we repent, or say we're sorry. God's love is wasteful and completely careless, God is indiscriminate and excessive, God loves us with reckless abandon, and of all this is made real and made **human** in the person of Jesus Christ, who shows us the way of life-giving love.

So how are we to go about this life of following in the way of Jesus? Loving in this manner?

We are to put it into practice. We are to try and fail, and try and fail, and try and fail. Again and again and again, because as Methodist we believe that the life of faith is an active life of loving and growing in God's grace for the full healing and wholeness of our human relationships and the world. We believe that with God's help we can practice our way into the kingdom of God. That God is so good, God is so amazing, that God can actually work within us through the power of the Holy Spirit to form us more fully into the image of Christ, that God can work within our hearts to unleash new worlds of love and forgiveness, that if we open ourselves up to this story of God's life-saving love that God can do and will do incredible things through us for the sake of the world.

So, I want to propose two ways we can enact this in the coming week, two spiritual practices that might help us to grow in our love for God and our love for others. I want to encourage you to take these practices with you, but, as a friend of mine likes to say- **do what you can, not what you can't.**

Practice number 1. Listening. Seek out someone out this week, in your life who annoys you to no end. A person whose voice is like nails on the chalk board. That one person who you feel like it is their secret mission in life just to drive you insane. You know that person.

Seek them out, and find, even just a few minutes to listen to that person. Now, I find that this practice works best if you DON'T tell them how much they annoy you.

But simply hold some space for them. Be present with them. Try your best to listen to them, not just hear the words, but really try to listen, without any other agenda other than listening and remember that God listens to us even we are really annoying.

Practice number two. Being enough. Take some time to review all of your relationships, go through your Facebook friend list, or the church photo directory, or your cell phone contact list, whatever you have. And look for the person in your life, who deep down in your heart of hearts, you don't really think is enough. The person who seems to always somehow, somehow, disappoint you. The person who constantly doesn't meet your expectations, that person who has never done, or said, anything to deserve your love.

Now, after a few minutes of scrolling through your list or looking through your directory, you might find that this person you are looking for is actually you. Simply say in prayer to yourself or in prayer for the other person, you are enough for God, you are enough for God.

Jesus said in order to love others, we too must love ourselves.

He also never said his way of love would be easy. He only said it would save our life. This is the gospel of our Lord and our Savior, the good news that can transform our world.

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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