

August 23, 2015



“Five Marks of a Methodist: LOVE GOD”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Matthew 22: 36-38

‘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.

What makes you YOU? For a long time, I thought what made me ME was having red hair. Aside from a couple cousins who sort of looked like me in this regard, I thought my hair made me ME. Until I went to Scotland one time—and lo and behold there were redheads everywhere. Hmm...not so special after all. So, what is it? What makes you YOU?

The non-scientists among us might think it has something to do with the uniqueness of our DNA. But, then, identical twins have identical DNA and if you’ve ever known some you know that even they are not the same person. What makes you YOU?

Might be worth a bit of your time this afternoon to think about this a little while. Or maybe you’re already thinking about it and won’t hear another word I say and that’s OK. As long as God makes it in there somewhere as you ponder, or maybe even, as John Wesley would say, God is the place to start as well as the place to end up.

After all, God, in love, has made you YOU. And as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks liked to point out, each minted as a coin in the image of God, and yet, unlike coins, each completely and utterly unique. What makes you YOU?

Early on in his teaching, John Wesley tried to work this out for the people called ‘Methodist.’ Not each one individually, but as followers of Christ. In fact, the hyper-individualistic way we approach the question today might not even have occurred to him. But because he kept getting asked about ‘Methodists’ he tried to set it out in a treatise called “The Character of a Methodist.” Writing in 1742, he said:

“Since the name first came abroad into the world, many have been at a loss to know what a Methodist is; what are the principles and the practice of those who are commonly called by that name; and what the distinguishing marks of this sect, "which is everywhere spoken against.”

You have to remember that we Methodists, in the beginning, we derisively called “Methodists” because of the highly disciplined practices that Wesley taught—in prayer and service and so forth. “Methodist” was often said with a sneer—or at best, suspicion about what these very earnest folks were up to.

So Wesley set out to clarify—what makes a Methodist a Methodist? What are the distinguishing marks, characteristics, attributes, qualities that make a Methodist a Methodist?

This seems like a good way to begin a new sermon series this morning, I’m calling it the “Kick-Off Sermon Series” as we get back into the full array of activities and programs for the Fall, including a time next Sunday for Newcomers to gather and get to know one another and ask all your questions about the life of this congregation, the first day of Preschool a week from tomorrow, and Kick-Off Sunday September 13th. It seems like a good time to take a look at who we are and what this whole endeavor is all about.

As Wesley said: “Come, and let us look one another in the face. And perhaps some of you who hate what I am called, may love what I am by the grace of God...”

For these next five weeks, let us look one another in the face and discover who we are, by the grace of God.

Now when Wesley would speak or preach, he would go on for hours and evidently people expected and appreciated that. I’m smart—I won’t try that this morning. It’s too hot, for one thing. So let me start with his words and then hit the highlights. If you ever want to read his whole piece, we’ll put a link to it on the webpage.

He wrote: : ‘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.”

If you know your Bible like my Grandmother Farris did, by heart, you would know that Wesley was quoting Scripture here to form his answer. What makes a Methodist a Methodist? Romans 5:5—“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” as the NRSV translates it.

God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit and therefore we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength—that’s Matthew 22:37.

The first mark of a Methodist is that we know that we are loved by God 1000% and because of that, we love God with our whole being. There you have it: a Methodist loves God. Everything else follows.

Wesley begins his list right at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Remember, when asked the greatest commandment, what Jesus said? “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. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates this in *The Message*: “Love the Lord your God with all your

passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them."

We'll circle back around to the second one as our fifth Mark as this Kick-Off Sermon Series concludes. It is the first that calls for our attention today, the first commandment and the first mark—a Methodist loves God.

Do you remember the story from John's gospel of Peter sitting on the shore with Jesus after breakfast? Jesus asks him three times: do you love me? You know I do, Lord. Do you love me? Yes, you know I love you. Do you love me? he asks again and Peter starts to get annoyed. He snaps back: You know I do! Hmmm, Jesus seems to say. You know that means that you'll need to follow me wherever I go. I am inviting you, Peter, into a new beginning, into a new future.

A Methodist loves God. Yes, but this is not a sentimental, romantic, syrupy kind of love. It's got to be deeply grounded and anchored to the conviction that God first loves us and we certainly know better than anyone else what a gift that is because, God knows, there are plenty of reasons why we don't merit or earn this love. It's not of our doing; it is of God. God so loves us! The knowledge and conviction of God's love sets us free and opens for us a kind of wholeness of heart, whole being and mind that is then manifest in our love for God.

We who are so scattered, so stressed, pulled in so many directions... we who are constantly distracted and told to measure our worth by the things of this world... we who lose track of up from down? Chasing after every rabbit that pops up in our path? Do this. Try that. Eat this. Wear that. Watch this. Buy that. Need this. Change that. It's easy to feel that we are trapped into being someone we do not wish to be and living a life we do not desire to live.

Do we not long for a unified life, an undivided life, a focus, a purpose, an abiding and deep center? To find it, Wesley knew, was to turn to our Creator, the one who forms us and loves us as we are, the love of God, our All in All. Hear Eugene Peterson again: "First, God. God is the subject of life. God is foundational for living. If we don't have a sense of the primacy of God, we will never get it right, get life right, get our lives right. Not God at the margins, nor God as an option; not God on the weekends. God at the center and circumference. God first and last; God, God, God."

Wesley wrote: "What then is the mark? Who is a Methodist, according to your own account?" 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, [quoting the Psalmist here] "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!"

We would do well to ponder these words of Psalm 73 every day for the rest of our life, read them over and over, let them sink in deep. As one writer has said: "They open the door to our whole being, commencing a journey that moves us from superficiality to substance, start to finish. To move beyond 'churchianity' to Christianity, from membership to discipleship."

Seems to me that there's a reason why Jesus made love a commandment, rather than a suggestion. It takes intentionality and commitment. It requires our deepest resolve. We love by choosing to love. We love by living into the love in which God creates us, and redeems us, and sustains us. We live into love by loving God whole-lifedly, as I like to say, our whole life long. We humans may start out in our relationship with God first out of fear, as if we were not worthy of God's love, grow past that to loving God out of desire for a reward, like a good employee. And later, if we've been working at this relationship, striving and praying to grow closer to God, we gradually grow into joyful love of God.

To love God whole-lifedly is to love God with the whole of who we are, over the whole of our life-time, choosing to affirm, over and over again, that there is a love arching over and through it all. To love God whole-lifedly is to live life with God as our constant companion and friend, our guardian, guide and stay. The God of love is the God who creates us for love, who redeems us through love, who sustains us by love—loving us just as we are yet always working in us to lead us to become more.

What makes you YOU? What makes me ME?—God's love makes us who we are, poured into our hearts, working in us, through us, embraced at the deepest core of who we are, God at the center and the circumference.. And from such a life of love, the love and goodness of God will flow to the world. This is the first mark of a Methodist.

Thanks be God.

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>

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Roberta Bondi, [To Love as God Loves](#) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

Ruben Job. [Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living](#). Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007.

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