



“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.

Over six years ago, some of the leaders of our congregation, including professionals in the area of marketing, met to talk about how to tell our First UMC story best out there, in the larger community, to people who may or may not know anything about what church is, what churches do, what church is for. And some of those people who may have had bad church experiences at some point in their lives. People for whom church was boring or irrelevant or coercive or even harmful to them, body or soul. Or churches who taught that you had to leave your mind at the door. Or churches who seemed to care not for the community and world around them.

How do we tell our story? It's not enough just to say “y'all come! because we're nice people here.” Or “y'all come because we need more of you to fill up our pews and committees.” Or “y'all come because...and then fill out that sentence with the reasons YOU come to church and assume that those reasons are going to apply to everyone else, or even that everyone else will have any idea of what you're talking about.

The world has changed so much. We know that, but it's hard to get our minds around it totally. And it's hard to figure out all the implications of that change for how we do what we do here, and how we talk about what we do in ways that actually communicate with people who don't speak our “language.” That is, for whom “churchese” is more foreign even than Chinese.

When and where I grew up, pretty much everybody went to church on Sundays. It certainly wasn't an option in our home. We went. Every single week. But then, we also had an Oldsmobile. How long has it been since you've seen an Oldsmobile? How many of you don't even know what I'm talking about? And we had milk delivered to our doorstep once a week. And when you went to the gas station, you'd simply pull up and a nice, friendly man would talk to my Dad, and fill up the tank, and check the oil and the tire pressure, and clean the windshield, front and back. And then Dad would get out his wallet and pay with real cash money!

Do you know that a huge percentage of young people in the US today have never, ever been inside a church for any reason, including a wedding or funeral? A “welcome mat” alone is not going to do it. How do we tell our story in this day and age? What might get at communicating what this place, this community of faith is really about?

Six years ago, we came up with these three phrases and they still seem to work well. You'll see them around on vertical banners:

God is real. God is love.
Every person matters. You matter.
Together, we can change the world.

These three phrases are really just another way of saying not only what church in general is, but more precisely, what a Methodist is. And at this time, when the United Methodist Church is wrestling mightily with who we are and what we're about, it seems a good moment to go back to basics and look again at what John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said about what makes a Methodist a Methodist. And so we're re-visiting a sermon series from four years ago called “Five Marks of a Methodist.” There's a little book that lays all this out available for sale at the Hospitality Table during Coffee Hour and we've made a little card for each of you to help us all remember who and whose we are.

First, you need to know that we Methodists, in the beginning, were called “methodists” derisively by the very proper Church of England folks, because of the highly disciplined and *methodical practices* that Wesley—himself an Anglican priest—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 with their weekly class meetings, small groups in which they sought to hold themselves and one another accountable to their faith. And their weekly visits to the prisons lest they ever forget the suffering of the poor. Wesley's weaving together of personal piety and social holiness, which Nathan pointed to last Sunday in his Labor Day homily, set Wesley and his Methodists apart from the church of the day.

In the face of much misunderstanding and scorn, 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? He set it out in a treatise called “The Character of a Methodist.” Writing in 1738, 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.

And it being generally believed, that I was able to give the clearest account of these things, (as having been one of the first to whom that name was given, and the person by whom the rest were supposed to be directed,) I have been called upon, in all manner of ways, and with the utmost earnestness, so to do. I yield at last to the continued importunity both of friends and enemies; and do now give the clearest account I can, in the presence of the Lord and Judge of heaven and earth, of the principles and practice whereby those who are called Methodists are distinguished from other[s].”

What are the marks of a Methodist? Wesley 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."

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, the first mark of a Methodist: a Methodist loves God. Everything else follows.

Wesley begins his list right in the center 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."

A Methodist loves God. 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.

Do we not long for a unified life, an undivided life, a focus, a purpose, a north star? We Methodists are to understand that salvation means wholeness. It is not something for after our death. It is now. And it is found as we find the ground of our being in the love of God, our All in All. Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*: "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."

Seems to me that there's a reason why Jesus made love a commandment, rather than a suggestion. The early desert mothers and fathers taught that loving God is something to be learned over a very long time. They understood that we humans start out in our relationship with God first out of fear, as if we were not worthy of God's love. We 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 begin to grow into joyful love of God. This is what Christian spiritual disciplines and practices are designed to do.

We love because we are commanded to love. 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.

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.

This is the first mark of a Methodist. A Methodist loves God. That's about as basic and as challenging as it gets.

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.

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>

Eugene H. Peterson. [The Message](#). Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995.

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