

***Summer Sermon Series: "So, What is a United Methodist?"***

***Sermon Title: Practical***

***Isaiah 5:1-7; John 15:1-8; Hebrews 11:29-12:2***

***Salem United Methodist Church***

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Our Summer Sermon Series is exploring what Methodism is. Many today do not understand what the Christian faith is, much less the difference between the denominations. As Methodists we need to know who we are, how we began, why we began, and the impact Methodism has had on the world so that we can not only grow in our faith, but speak knowledgeably to others about it. In previous sermons we discovered that Methodism began as a spiritual movement in the 1700s. We explained how Methodists believe faith can be experienced and we talked about the "method" to our spirituality is one of being disciplined. Today we will discover the practical aspects of being a Methodist Christian.

Life is practical. Life is not a theory. Life is hands-on. It is realistic. There is function and purpose to life. For instance, we do not lie in bed each morning and speculate about getting out of bed. We might for a few minutes, but getting out of bed is not an idea or a notion. The practical aspects of life, such as the need to use the bathroom or a rumbling stomach, soon snap us back to the reality of getting out of bed. Also, we don't sit around day after day and theorize or imagine what life is about. Sooner or later reality kicks in, such as having to pay bills which require a source of income. So we need to find a job to pay the bills. For some of us discovering this is a harsh reality and is part of growing up! Every aspect of life has practical implications. No part of our life is theory. In fact, we were created to be practical human beings by a practical Creator. Whether one subscribes to the theory of evolution or one is a biblical literalist, there is order to the creation.

As Christians we believe in God as our Creator who is not removed from or uninterested in creation. The whole story of the Bible is one in which God is involved with all of creation, especially humans. Can we think of some examples? Here are some. God chose leaders. God wrestled with Jacob. God heard the cries of the enslaved Hebrew people and rescued them. God gave them rules to live by. God intervened through the prophets to draw the people back to God. God came to earth in human form, experienced our birth, life, and death in the divine human, Jesus. He rose from the dead to prove to us that there is life beyond death. While here, Jesus taught us about God's love and grace, as well as he healed many. God sends us the Holy Spirit so God can be with us always as our constant companion on life's journey. And God forgives us when we admit that we have harmed ourselves and others. God is a hands-on God. God knows and understands our reality. We are not a theory to God. The Apostle Paul understood this hands-on God. While in Athens, the center of Greek philosophy, Paul entered into an interesting discussion with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Paul stated that it is because of Jesus "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Some of the philosophers thought Paul to be crazy because he was speaking in such practical terms.

Because God is a practical God and created us to be practical, John Wesley viewed faith as practical. Faith is not something to be talked about in some ivory towers as an intellectual exercise, but faith is to be lived. Faith is hands-on. Wesley believed that we have to work at faith. He used the term, "working out our salvation." This term can be misleading. It does not mean that we can save ourselves. Wesley was very clear that God saves us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Wesley specifically preached that we are saved by God's grace. Our salvation is a gift from God. We can do nothing to earn it. But how we come to realize what this gift is and what it means to us is the "working out" part. We could call this the "growing in our faith" part.

As people were listening to Wesley's preaching, they wanted to know more about how to be faithful Christians. So Wesley developed the concept of small groups as the place where people could learn more about their faith and learn how to live their faith in their families, in places of work, and in their communities. These small groups became the place where they "worked out their salvation." These groups, called societies, became places of learning, caring, and holding each other accountable for their actions. As these societies grew, the groups were broken into smaller groups called class meetings. Anyone could attend these meetings; anyone who was serious about making a change in one's life. Wesley used this language about admission to the meetings. One needed to have "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins." We don't talk about wrath much. We want to be messengers of hope, not devastation. Maybe we should talk more about

wrath, because there is so much of it in the world. Isaiah didn't mince words about God's wrath. God was so upset with the Israelites God planned to destroy them. They were rotten people who had forgotten how to be merciful and just. I wonder what it would have looked like if the Israelites would have listened to Isaiah and changed the way they were living. Would changing the way they treated each other have changed God's mind?

So part of "working out one's salvation" is identifying those areas of one's life that is not pleasing to God and then begin to make changes. Being a disciplined person Wesley saw a need for rules to assist participants in this process so "wherever [the rules are] really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits." Wesley was hoping that if people followed three rules they would become a fertile vineyard that grew good grapes and not rotten ones.

Wesley's rules were very practical. 1) Do no harm; 2) Do good; 3) Attend to all the ordinances of God. We discussed the third one last week as part of being disciplined. The ordinances of God include being disciplined in our public worship of God, receiving the ministry of the Word, either read or interpreted, receiving the Supper of the Lord, having time for family and private prayer, searching the Scriptures, and fasting or abstinence. Attending to these keeps us connected to the Vine, Jesus, the source of life, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith. Attending to these is the foundation of our faith and keeps us in relationship with Christ. So what happens if we do not practice this third rule? The first two will not seem important and become increasingly impossible to do. For Wesley faith was real and to be practiced every day. It is more than saying I'm a Christian. It is acting as a Christian. The rules are simple, easy to understand and remember, but challenging to put into practice.

Wesley defined his first rule, "Do no harm," as "avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced." Then he listed items that were generally practiced in the eighteenth century. This list included: 1) The taking of the name of God in vain. 2) The profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein or by buying or selling. 3) Drunkenness: buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity. 4) Slaveholding; buying or selling slaves. 5) Fighting, quarreling, brawling, brother going to law with brother; returning evil for evil. 6) The buying or selling goods that have not paid the duty. 7) The giving or taking things on usury—i.e., unlawful interest. 8) Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation; particularly speaking evil of magistrates or of ministers. 9) Doing to others as we would not they should do unto us. 10) Doing what we know is not for the glory of God, as: the putting on of gold and costly apparel. 11) The singing those songs, or reading those books, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God. 12) Softness and needless self-indulgence. 13) Laying up treasure upon earth. 14) Borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them. If you were making a list of "do no harm" items, what would you list?

Wesley defined the second rule, "Do Good" as "being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to [everyone]." Then he listed a few items. They include: 1) To their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison. 2) To their souls, by instructing, reproving, or exhorting all we have any [conversation] with; 3) By doing good, especially to them that are of the household of faith; employing them preferably to others; helping each other in business, and so much the more because the world will love its own and them only. 4) By running with patience the race which is set before them, denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily. What would you include in the list of things we as Christians should do to "do good?"

These three rules practiced by those who participated in the class meetings played an important role in the fabric of their communities. These Methodists became Christians who took their faith seriously. They began to speak out against the injustices that they saw and experienced. They joined forces and worked to make social changes. In America, Methodists began hospitals to heal the sick and began schools so both men and women could receive an education. Many of today's universities have Methodist roots. They didn't do good things because they were good people. They did them because they accepted the responsibility to bear good fruit for Christ. They were running the race set before them. As Methodists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who live out our faith through this congregation, how do we accept the responsibility to bear good fruit for Christ? What is the race that is set before us? How are we running it?

**References:** *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* by Richard Heitzenrater; *The 2012 Discipline of the United Methodist Church*; [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org); *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* by Rueben Job

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