

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

Psalm 85; Luke 11:1-10; Colossians 2:6-15

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In the 21st century we are discovering that many people have a lack of loyalty to organized groups. This is true across our society including organized religion. More and more people are claiming to be spiritual and not religious. So what does it mean to be a Christian in the United Methodist tradition? In this sermon series we will explore what United Methodism is and why we are United Methodists. Today we will look at our historical perspective.

Many of us were not born and raised in the Methodist Church or United Methodist Church. We have come from many different backgrounds: Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Church of God, Congregational, Lutheran, United Church of Christ, non-denominations, to name a few. Some of us have no religious or a non-Christian background. We at Salem are a melting pot of sorts when it comes to our past church experiences. Yet we all claim Salem United Methodist Church to be our church home. So, what does it mean to be a Christian who claims to be a Methodist? This past Wednesday in the Upper Room discussion group, one of the questions based on that morning's devotion was "Is scripture the central focus of the service?" I was pleased when other participants noted that they saw how the songs that we sing, the prayers offered, and the preached Word all focus on scripture. As the worship leader, I begin developing our worship from what the scriptures are informing me. I believe that the Word of God is an important component to our life as a disciple of Christ. However, this sermon series will not be interpreting scripture as much as it will be interpreting what United Methodism is. We will not be ignoring scripture. Biblical passages will be read with a dash of John Wesley's commentary added to connect us to our heritage. And hopefully through these sermons we will be called to be more faith disciples of Jesus Christ.

History is not just a subject that we study in school. History is the foundation on which we have sprung forth into the present. For instance, none of us were created out of nothingness. Each of us has generations and generations of family that begat us. When we do genealogical digging we discover connections that have made us into the individuals we are today. It is the same with history. When we study what people went through ages ago and what challenges they had, we begin to understand why they made their decisions and choices. Their lives can inform ours and help guide us into hopefully a better future for the next generations.

The Methodist Church has a rich history that cannot all be covered in the space of this sermon. But here is a synopsis. Methodism began as a revival movement in the 1700s within the Church of England. Two brothers, John and Charles Wesley, were sons of a priest, Samuel, and a mother, Susanna, who preached from her kitchen. As students at Oxford studying for the priesthood, they formed a group called the Holy Club. This group met for Bible study and communion. They fasted regularly and visited the sick and prisoners, doing what they could for them. They held each other accountable for their Christian living. Those who were not in the club saw them as lunatics and coined them, "The Methodists," because they had a method to practicing their faith. However, this method of discipleship became the foundation of a new revival in the Church of England.

After becoming priests John and Charles came to the Georgia as missionaries. Both failed miserably and returned to England where they both at different times had a renewing of their spirit. Charles put his experience in a poem which is found on page 58 of our hymnal. We sing several of those verses in the hymn, "O For a Thousand Tongues Sing." The stanza that highlights his conversion is, "I felt my Lord's atoning blood close to my soul applied; me, me he loved, the Son of God, for me, for me he died!" John's conversion occurred at a meeting on May 24, 1738 at Aldersgate St. in London. Luther's Preface to the Epistle to Romans was being read. John wrote in his journal: "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." These two men who were trained theologians experienced the love of Christ in their hearts and it changed them and their call to ministry.

England was changing in the 1700s with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. There was a developing middle class which the Wesley brothers saw the Church of England ignoring. They believed their mission was to revive faith in England or as Wesley stated "to spread Christian holiness throughout the land." So John rode his horse to preach wherever he could gather a group whether in the fields or on street corners. Charles set his theological poems to familiar tunes. Thus the Methodist movement had both music and preaching. But they didn't just preach and leave for the next town. They encouraged people to form small groups called class meetings or societies. These groups were modeled after their Oxford Holy Club. People met weekly for worship, study, and held each other accountable for their Christian life. One of the questions that they would ask each other is "How goes it with your soul?" The movement grew through both the preaching and the small groups. Lay persons spread the Word through preaching and starting more small groups. Wherever these groups sprung up, the communities began to hold to higher morals. There was less violence and drunkenness. Some believe that the Methodist revival had great influence on English history. It may have prevented a

revolution in England like took place in France and it certainly had a role in the abolishment of slavery without a civil war.

As people were immigrating to the colonies, the Methodists lay preachers brought their class meetings and societies with them. One of them was Richard Strawbridge who lived in what is now Carroll County. However, these lay preachers did not have the authority of the church to give the sacraments of Baptism and The Lord's Supper. Only the Church of England's priests could. As the political situation heated up between the colonies and England, the priests returned back to England. John Wesley knew he had to help his flock in the newly formed United States. First, he asked his bishop to ordain these lay preachers. His request was denied. Then after much soul searching and prayer, he felt he had the authority to ordain them. Charles disagreed vehemently. John's decision to ordain lay people created a division between the brothers which was never repaired. In 1784 John ordained Thomas Coke to be the bishop for the newly formed Methodist Church in America. John had written a book of rules based on the Church of England's which we call our Book of Discipline. He sent this and a revised prayer book with Coke to America. On Christmas Day 1784 at a church called Lovely Lane in Baltimore, Coke ordained Francis Asbury, a noted lay preacher, as a deacon, elder, and bishop. And thus a new denomination, The Methodist Episcopal Church, was born. John Wesley never intended to form a new denomination. His intent was to revive the church. Wesley remained a priest faithful to the Church of England until his death. The Methodist Episcopal Church grew as our nation grew. Methodist preachers moved with the pioneers establishing churches in the new territories. In the 20th century the Methodist church was the largest denomination in our country.

People record history from their own points of view. If we are honest there are always dark sections which we can also learn from. So it has been with the history of Methodism. From the onset there was racial discrimination. Blacks, free or slave, could only sit in the balcony of churches. Some were authorized to preach, but only to blacks. Preachers such as Richard Allen led the way to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in New York. And James Varick helped begin the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Philadelphia.

Another schism occurred in 1830 when seven pastors left the Methodist Episcopal Church to form the Methodist Protestant Church. This group believed that the church should not have a bishop and wanted laity to have equal voting rights during Conference. The pastor that started Salem, Richard McCormick, was one of these pastors. He began Salem Methodist Protestant Church here in Brookeville in 1833.

The Civil War had a grave impact on the Methodist Episcopal Church. It split with the nation into the North and South Methodist Episcopal Churches. There were Methodists who opposed slavery and Methodists who held slaves. Both could reference the Bible to support their viewpoints. In 1939 the North and South Methodist Episcopal Churches and the Methodist Protestant Church reconciled to form the Methodist Church. The compromise was that we still kept the position of bishop, but now clergy and laity have equal vote at our Conferences. In 1969 the Methodist Church and the United Brethren church joined together. The United Brethren Church was a very small denomination but had a similar theology to Methodism. The compromise was that the Brethren name would be dropped, but we would keep the word, United, and it would be joined with Methodist. Thus, we became The United Methodist Church, but we have not reconciled with AME or AME Zion despite efforts to do so.

A highlight of our history is that we have been ordaining women since 1956. That is 60 years that women have been officially pastoring churches. And as of last week, our Northeast Jurisdiction made history by choosing two African-American women to be bishops. Rev. Cynthia Moore-Koikoi from the Baltimore-Washington Conference will be serving Western Pennsylvania Conference and Rev. LaTrelle Miller Easterling from the New England Conference will be our new bishop.

But the Methodist Church is also going through a challenging time over the issue of ordination of LBGT persons and allowing clergy to marry same gendered couples. Our past General Conference in May voted to uphold our Discipline which does not allow for either. In June some Annual Conferences voted to ordain LBGT persons and did. Our Conference voted to uphold the current Discipline and did not ordain deacon candidate T.C. Morrow. Last week the Western Jurisdiction voted for a married Lesbian pastor, Karen Oliveto, to be a bishop. The United Methodist Church remains divided on these issues. Both sides can quote scriptures to support their viewpoints. People on both sides of the issue are leaving the church. Our Council of Bishops is trying to find a way forward for the church to avoid yet another schism. We need to be praying for them as they lead the United Methodist Church into the future.

I do not have the solution to this issue. What I can say is that we need to learn from our history and remember the words of the Psalmist, only God can save. God's love for us is always faithful. God's truth and righteousness prevails. And remember the words of Jesus who said that we are to knock, seek, and ask because no time is an unreasonable time with God, either for hearing or answering prayer. And remember it is Christ who forgives all sins. Next week we will be looking at how the United Methodist Church is experiential.

References: *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* by Richard Heitzenrater; *The Story of American Methodism* by Frederick Norwood, www.umc.org.

