

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

Sermon Title: Experiential

Psalm 107:1-9, 43; John 3:1-17; Romans 6:6-11

Salem United Methodist Church

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In today's world many are claiming to be spiritual but not religious. They have given up on organized religion. Yet, much of organized religion began as spiritual movements including Methodism. During this summer sermon series, "So, What is a United Methodist?" we will be rediscovering the spiritual heritage of Methodism. Today we will explore the experiential part of our spirituality as Methodists.

Personal experience is important to us even in our virtual world. We yearn to go and see new sights, experience the thrills of new adventures, taste the latest food crave, or hear the hottest band live in concert. Phrases like, "Experiencing life is what it is all about," "Live each day to its fullest," "*Carpe diem*, seize the day," "Experience the moment," "Every day is a new day to experience life," are all part of our vernacular. Advertisers know that focusing on experience sells products. We have commercials that show a car being driven really fast through beautiful scenery. Or that show someone parachuting off a high cliff and floating through a valley. Or that depict someone taking a bite of a delectable, juicy, succulent food item. Watching these experiences creates in us a yearning to have a similar experience. Showing an experience sells products because as humans we are all about the experience. We need to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell life. So it is with our faith. We can experience the love of Jesus in our hearts and have the joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts.

Experiencing faith was something new in the 1700s. John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism was an ordained Church of England priest, but he did not know that one could experience the love of God. John grew up in religious home. His father was a priest and his mother trained her nineteen children to read the Bible and pray faithfully every day. John went to Oxford to study for the priesthood. He was trained in sound biblical and theological teaching as well as in the traditions of the church. He could research and give a good intellectual talk on religion. Yet, when he was aboard a boat crossing the Atlantic Ocean to Georgia where he was to be a missionary, he had a faith crisis. A storm came up. There was a real danger that the boat would capsize and everyone would drown. John realized that he was afraid to die. Then he heard singing. There was a group of German Moravians aboard the boat and they were singing praises to God in the midst of the storm. Wesley noted that he had never witnessed such calm assurance. He wrote, "being in imminent danger of death, and very uneasy on that account, I was strongly convinced that the cause of that uneasiness was unbelief, and that the gaining a true, living faith was the one thing needful for me." While in Georgia he met with Moravians and learned about their faith which was one of having a personal relationship with Jesus.

Upon his return to England, he became friends with a Moravian pastor by the name of Peter Bohler. Wesley and Bohler had many discussions about faith. Through these discussions Wesley concluded that true faith in Christ is the "constant peace from a sense of forgiveness" that Christ has "dominion over sin." He journaled, "I well saw no one could have such a sense of forgiveness, and not feel it. But I felt it not." In these discussions Bohler shared that "faith was the gift, the free gift of God," and that God would give this gift to anyone who really wanted it. John decided that he would seek this gift, "by absolutely renouncing all dependence, in whole or in part, upon my own works or righteousness, on which I had really grounded my hope of salvation, though I knew it not, from my youth up." And "by adding to the constant use of all the other means of grace continual prayer for this very thing — justifying, saving faith; a full reliance on the blood of Christ shed for me; a trust in him as my Christ, as my sole justification, sanctification, and redemption." In other words, John decided that he would not rely on himself and his own good works to save him, but he prayed for the grace of Christ to save him from his sins and transform him into a new person.

And then on May 24, 1738 John had an experience which he described it as, "my heart was strangely warmed." He had gone to a meeting on 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." John Wesley had experienced the love of God in his heart. He had the head knowledge, but it took many years for it to drop just twelve inches into his heart. His life was changed and his mission in life as well. He began to realize that the Anglican Church was not attending to the hearts of people, and so he began his ministry to revive the church through preaching that helped to transform these hearts.

This idea of experiencing the love of Christ became a theme not only in his preaching but in his interpretation of scripture. He wrote these words about John chapter 3, "Our Lord shows, that no external profession, no ceremonial ordinances or privileges of birth, could entitle any to the blessings of the Messiah's kingdom: that an entire change of heart as well as of life was necessary for that purpose: that this could only be wrought in [us] by the almighty power of God: that every [one] born into the world was by nature in a state of sin, condemnation, and misery: that the free mercy of God had given his Son to deliver them from it, and to raise them to a blessed immortality: that all might share in these benefits, procured by Jesus being lifted up on the cross, and to be received by faith in him." He wrote that being born again is to "to be born of water and the Spirit." One who has experienced "that great inward change by the Spirit" is to "be baptized as the outward sign... To be born again, is to be inwardly changed from all sinfulness to all holiness. It is fitly so called, because as great a change then passes on the soul as passes on the body when it is born into the world."

John Wesley also believed that we could experience this change over and over again. In fact we can experience it every day or every moment of every day. God is continually yearning to transform us through opening our eyes to the evil in our hearts, the words we say that hurt, the acts we do that harm. God is continually inviting us to die to our sins as Christ died for our sins, so that we can become alive in Christ, or be made over into being more and more like Christ, that is living as Christ taught and lived, loving as Christ loved, forgiving as Christ forgives.

Experiencing the love of Christ in one's heart can be a one-time experience or it can happen many times in one's life. Have you ever experienced the love of Christ in your heart? Can you name at least one time? Did you experience that the forgiveness of your sins?

For me, I have not had any one moment such as an Aldersgate moment in my life. I've had many. Each experience has been different for me at different stages of my life. I remember as a youth committing my life to Christ at my confirmation. Even though I did this with all intentionality, I am not sure that I wholly understood or felt the enormity of Christ's forgiveness. As I grew into adulthood and became more acutely aware of my thoughts about others and my behavior towards them, I realized I needed to ask God's forgiveness. Asking for forgiveness of my sins was and still is extremely humbling. It can be hard to admit when one has done wrong to anyone much less God, but receiving forgiveness, for me is as refreshing as new fallen rain. Receiving that free gift of God for me is like a release from the past. Receiving God's grace is both freeing and renewing at the same time. Does this mean that I no longer sin, that I no longer think the thoughts I shouldn't, or say and do things I shouldn't? No, but when I become aware and admit that I have done wrong and seek forgiveness, the receiving of the grace of God is like being born anew all over again. It's fresh like spring. With each of these experiences of God's grace, my faith deepens and my heart enlarges to love God and God's people more fully.

Charles Wesley wrote a prayer poem that explains the grace of God changing hearts. "O for a heart to praise my God, a heart from sin set free, a heart that always feels thy blood so freely shed for me. A humble, lowly, contrite heart, believing, true, and clean, which neither life nor death can part from Christ who dwells within. A heart in every thought renewed and full of love divine, perfect and right and pure and good, a copy, Lord of thine. Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart; come quickly from above, write thy new name upon my heart, thy new, best name of Love."

References: *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* by Richard Heitzenrater; *The Story of American Methodism* by Frederick Norwood; John Wesley's Journals; "How Aldersgate Changed John Wesley," www.umc.org; "O For A Heart To Praise My God," #417, *The United Methodist Hymnal*