

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

Sermon Title: Disciplined

Isaiah 1:10-17; Luke 12:29-34; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Salem United Methodist Church

August 7, 2016

Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

In today’s world many have given up on organized religion. They claim to be spiritual but not religious. Methodism began as a spiritual movement in the 1700s to revive the Church of England. 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 disciplined aspect of our spirituality as Methodists.

There are many career choices and jobs that require discipline. Each of them has its own rules to create discipline or order. Protocols are put into place to create stability and uniformity. In fact some management theorists believe that discipline is a necessity for an organization to prosper. So no matter who is doing the task, the product will be the same or as similar as possible. For instance, when we go into a restaurant to order our favorite menu item, we expect to receive the same plate of food each time no matter who is cooking in the kitchen. The consumer expects consistency in a product. To create consistency requires discipline for all those involved in the process. Each person needs to know what to do, how to do it, and have some sort of pride or faith in the organization that employs them. Think about your own job. What kind of discipline does it require? What protocols are in place?

One area that requires strict discipline is our military. Anyone who has been through any type of boot camp will testify that the military trains each person who serves our country so they will know how to respond by rote in a time of crisis. There is no time to think when one is under pressure. One needs to be able to follow orders, know what the orders mean, and know how to execute these orders automatically. There is no time to disagree or discuss on a battlefield. To be able to respond like this takes disciplined practice.

Being disciplined in our spiritual lives takes practice, too. John Wesley was a disciplined person and his discipline still impacts Methodism today. He learned to be disciplined from his mother, Susanna. She had to be disciplined in order to survive mothering nineteen children! She ran her household on a strict schedule. Each child knew what she/he was to be doing each hour of the day. Her goal was to develop Christian character in her children. So she educated both her daughters and sons. Girls generally did not receive an education in the late 1700s. Also, severe physical punishment was the norm in the early eighteenth century, but Susanna’s policy was “strength guided by kindness.” She rewarded good behavior and if the child confessed of his/her wrongdoing, there would be no punishment. In addition, she believed each child deserved individual attention so she scheduled to spend one hour alone with each child once a week. She taught her children not only the Scriptures, but also she set an example for them on how to apply their faith to daily living. Susanna once wrote, “We must know God experientially for unless the heart perceive and know Him to be the supreme good, her only happiness, unless the soul feel and acknowledge that she can have no repose, no peace, no joy, but in loving and being loved by Him.” Her children knew by her disciplined words and actions that she was a woman of faith.

John was able to transfer this type of disciplined childhood into his adult life. For him being a Christian required discipline. It required spending time in prayer, reading the Bible, and writing down his thoughts about God. He would rise early in the morning to spend one hour doing these three things: praying, reading the Bible, and journaling. This morning routine gave him the foundation for the rest of the day, guiding him in decision making and reminding him where his treasure is, the place he most wanted to be and ended up being.

As Wesley preached to create revival in the Church of England a group of people came to him for counsel and prayer. He invited them to join him weekly. As their numbers grew Wesley realized that these groups needed structure and discipline. So he created the General Rules for these groups called Societies. Wesley wrote that they were to be “a company of [people] having the form and seeking the power of

godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation [that is counsel or encouragement,] and to watch over one another in love that they may help each other to work out their salvation.” As these Societies grew in numbers, Wesley decided that for effective spiritual growth they needed to be broken into smaller groups called classes. Each class had about twelve people in it with a designated leader. Richard McCormick, the founding pastor of Salem, was a class leader in Ellicott City before he became a pastor in Brookeville. The class meetings became the venue for continued and disciplined spiritual growth, as well as a means to invite others to participate in “working out their salvation.”

For Wesley, the working out of one’s salvation was demonstrated in the fruits of one’s life. Those who participated in these class meetings were expected to bear fruit through following three rules: 1) Do no harm. 2) Do good. 3) Attend to all the ordinances of God. The word, ordinance, means rule or order. Next week we will discuss the first two when we discuss how Methodism is a practical spirituality. Today we will look at the third one: Attend to all the ordinances of God. Wesley listed the ordinances of God to be: 1) worshipping God in public, that is going to church on Sundays to worship God. 2) The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded, which means listening to God’s Word and an interpretation of it. 3) Receiving the Supper of the Lord or Holy Communion regularly so that we have an outward sign of the inner grace of God in our lives. 4) Participating in family and private prayer. 5) Searching the scriptures, that is participating in a Bible study. 6) Fasting or abstinence.

For Wesley these disciplines were to be practiced as a way to remain faithful to God. They were the opposite of what God had Isaiah preach to the people. In this scripture God is tired of their heartless, routine worship. God wants us to worship with meaning and purpose. We are to be intentional in our worship by recognizing, honoring, and giving thanks to God. Isaiah preached that the people were to clean up their act. Wesley’s disciplines help us clean up our act. When we discipline ourselves to fully be present in our worship of God on Sundays, when we listen to the scriptures being read and interpreted regularly, when we are disciplined to pray privately and with our families, when we receive Holy Communion regularly, when we fast or abstain from food or from any chosen activity which steals our time, money, and/or energy, we will be able to know God more fully and respond to the challenges in our lives as well as respond to God’s direction for our lives. Earlier I stated that discipline creates stability and order. That disciplined training kicks in when there is a time of crisis or one is under pressure. Discipline teaches us what to do and how to do it. Isaiah stated that the people were to say no to wrong. Learn to do good. Work for justice and help those in need. Sounds like Wesley’s first two rules of do no harm and do good. Practicing spiritual disciplines give our life direction and purpose.

Not many of us are like Wesley who spent the first hour of the morning in prayer, devotion, and Bible study. We choose to be too busy for this kind of thing. We are undisciplined when it comes to our spiritual lives. So what suffers in our lives when we don’t practice spiritual disciplines? What suffers when we don’t make time to worship God weekly so we can hear the scriptures read and preached? What suffers in our lives when we don’t pray in our families or privately? What suffers when we don’t study scriptures on a regular basis? What suffers when we don’t fast?

We can be disciplined in so many areas of our lives: in caring for our physical health, in managing our money, in having fun, in checking emails, Facebook, etc. but are we as disciplined in our spiritual lives as we are in these other areas?

Salem’s mission statement includes that we are to grow in our Christian faith. Practicing any or all of these spiritual practices can help us grow. None of us are finished growing in our faith. We are all a work in progress. We are all in Wesley’s words, “working out our salvation.” Which of these spiritual practices do you practice regularly? How do they help you live a faithful life? Which ones would you like to practice with more regularity? Which ones have you never practiced, but would be willing to try with support? Would you be willing to be part of a small group so to help you grow in your Christian faith?

