

Summer Sermon Series: “So, What is a United Methodist?”
Sermon Title: Love in Action
Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-18, 33-34; Luke 13:10-17; James 1:22-27
Salem United Methodist Church
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So, what is a United Methodist? This is the title of our summer sermon series. Salem is a United Methodist congregation, but many of us come from different religious backgrounds. This series of sermons is designed to help us understand who we are as United Methodists, so that we can grow in our faith, have the knowledge of our heritage, be able to share with others what our faith traditions are, and perhaps even reclaim some Methodist practices today.

I haven't always been a pastor and I haven't always been United Methodist. This is my story about I became United Methodist. Almost thirty years ago in a conversation with work colleagues, I was told that my viewpoints on Christianity sounded like Methodism. I asked, “What is Methodism?” I honestly don't remember the answer that was given, but I do remember that I was invited to attend worship at the Methodist church in town. Several months later, our family was sitting in the pews of this church listening to a sermon about God's grace. As I listened, tears rolled down my cheeks. To hear that God's love and grace is for every person, including unworthy me touched my heart in ways that is difficult to describe. To hear that God's grace continues to work in us every day to transform us to be more and more like Jesus Christ gave me hope for not only my future, but the future of the world. God is not finished with us yet! At the close of the worship, we sang, “Amazing Grace.” My husband turned to me to look at me. When he saw my tears, he said, “I think we found our new church home.” And we have been part of the United Methodist Church ever since. But I didn't know what Methodism is. To try to learn about it, I used the only resource available to me then, the encyclopedia. It talked about a method that Methodists use to develop their spirituality, but I didn't understand what it said. I thought, “What does a method have to do with the Christian faith?”

As I became involved in missions and Bible study classes, my faith was being formed. I saw how my personal beliefs in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with others, helping those in need, and working for justice in the world were at the heart of Wesley's practical theology. John Wesley figured this out while attending Oxford. He formed a small group called the Holy Club. Young Oxford men who were serious about their faith gathered several times a week for Bible study, prayer, communion, and examining their spiritual lives. But they also would visit with the sick, take food to the poor, visit those in prison, and teach orphans how to read. Their fellow students made fun of this method and nicknamed them, “the methodists.” Each one of these young men became renowned church leaders and evangelists in England and in America. Something in this method shaped the faith of these young men and empowered them to become leaders in the church. Wesley took this method of spiritual formation in small groups and developed it as part of his revival in England. The small groups were called societies or class meetings. These groups had three rules: 1) Do no harm; 2) Do good; 3) And stay connected to God. But, why these three rules? Why this method?

For answers, we can turn to scripture and our passage in Leviticus is a good starting point. God gave the Israelites a method for holy living. Why? Because God is holy so they are to be holy. Then God defines how to be holy. When we read through these verses, did you notice how similar they are to the Ten Commandments? Did you notice how these verses are aligned, also, to Wesley's three rules? Which verses speak to staying connected to God? Which verses are about doing no harm? Which verses are about doing good? God is giving the people a method for living holy lives. The biblical definition of holiness is complete dedication to God which means separating ourselves from anything that draws us away from God. Israel was to be holy because of their relationship with God. They were called, liberated, and formed for God's mission in the world. To be holy is more than knowing the ceremonial worship of God, but it is intimately connected to acts of mercy and justice towards others. God's love is holy, just, and all encompassing. This is the character of God and according to John Wesley is to be the character of God's people.

Jesus embodied this character of God. Our Gospel lesson is just one example of the holy, just, and encompassing love of God in Jesus. Jesus encounters a sick woman who is bent over. His immediate response is to make her whole, to heal her. Jesus sees her with his divine eyes. As a woman she had no value in her culture,

but to Jesus she had more value than any beast of burden. So he heals her. This act of mercy is an act of holiness. For Jesus it has everything to do with keeping the Sabbath holy, but not according to the synagogue leaders. They saw Jesus breaking the rules of Sabbath rest. Jesus does not hesitate to call them, “Hypocrites.” They were more about keeping the ceremonial part of God’s holiness code than about the mercy aspect of being holy people. Back during the time of Jesus, the word, “hypocrite,” came from a Greek term that meant “play acting.” It referred to someone who impersonated a character on stage. Jesus saw the synagogue leader as one who was impersonating holiness, but not being holy.

For John Wesley, being a Christian was about developing a holiness of heart and life. It was not about having what one heard in church go in one ear and out the other, but holiness was about taking the message of Jesus to heart and acting on it. Wesley called this type of Christian an “altogether Christian.” The small groups, the societies and class meetings, were the means to understand and to develop this holiness. Wesley wrote in a sermon called, “The Character of a Methodist,” that the marks of a Methodist are to simply love God and neighbor. Those in these small groups began to visit the sick in the neighborhoods, began schools to teach youth how to read regardless of their gender or class, visited those in debtors prison and raised money to get them out of prison, and gave food to those had none. The people in these small groups were average people who worked hard to keep their own families out of debt. Yet they found the time and resources to be about the holiness of heart and life. Out of their efforts schools began, hospitals were built, shelters were created for the poorest, and prison ministries were established. These Methodists put their love into action.

So did the Methodist small groups in America. The first society was established in Carroll County by Robert Strawbridge, a lay pastor. There is documentation that this group included at least 25 men, their wives and children. Some were Quakers. From this society several churches were established. One church, Pipe Creek “Brick” church, became a Methodist Protestant Church. The church building still stands, but there is no longer a congregation. In the early 1800s, this congregation saw a need to educate both boys and girls so they began a school. This school was the forerunner of Western Maryland College which opened its doors in 1867 to both men and women. Their first president was a Methodist minister. Then in 1882, the college birthed a seminary called Westminster Seminary. In 1957 the seminary moved to Washington and is now called Wesley Theological Seminary. Western Maryland College is not called McDaniel College, named after a faithful Methodist, William McDaniel, who was a professor and administrator of the college. And it all began with a small group of people two hundred years ago. Today there are 119 American colleges and universities still enrolling students that were established by Methodists. Our General Board of Higher Education supports these institutions and provides scholarships for its students.

Providing education for everyone is only one way those involved in societies and class meetings were reaching out to the homeless and the loveless. They believed that education was the means to bettering one’s status. The Methodists also established Sunday Schools as a way to teach about the Bible and reach into their communities for the sake of the Gospel.

The people in these small groups were performing many acts of mercy. Many are undocumented, but through these acts they transformed their communities and our world. Here is the story of one Methodist that is documented. The General Commission on History and Archives had 1000 letters donated to them by the descendants of Bishop Gilbert Haven who lived in the 1800s. He was an outspoken abolitionist and believed in that every person was equal in the eyes of God. For him a civil society would be one that recognized equality under the law for every person regardless of race or gender. He also opposed racial separation in the churches. His radical views were well before his time. During the post-Civil War era, Bishop Haven was defining for the church and for our nation what it means to love our neighbor.

Salem is a church that honors love in action in many ways. We visit the sick. We give to the poor through school supplies and food. We restore homes in Appalachia. What other ways can we as a church, or can you as an individual put God’s love into action in your homes, with our neighbors, in our communities? How can we live more fully with a holiness of heart and life? Would it be helpful for you to be part of a small group that would encourage you as well as challenge you to grow in holiness of heart and life?

References: *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* by Richard Heitzenrater; *The 2012 Discipline of the United Methodist Church*; “Methodist History: Bishop Fought Slavery,” www.umc.org; *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life* by Charles Yrigoyen, Jr.; *Robert Strawbridge* by Frederick Maser; *Pilgrimage of Faith* by Douglas Chandler

