

***Summer Sermon Series: "So, What is a United Methodist?" Sermon Title: Faith in Action
Psalm 31:1-6; Luke 17:1-6; James 2:14-26
Salem United Methodist Church
August 28, 2016
Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling***

Today concludes our summer sermon series on "What is a United Methodist?" For the past four Sundays we have been looking at various aspects of the spirituality of being Methodist. We talked about our history. We learned that faith can be experienced, disciplined, and practical. For Methodists there is a method to our spirituality. We are all about putting God's love into action by loving our neighbor. Today we will look at how we can be put our faith into action. Putting faith into action is a witness to those in our culture who say they do not trust organized religion and may actually be a connectional point.

We all have our method of doing things. For instance, teachers are trained in special teaching methods. Researchers have a scientific method in conducting experiments. Website designers have a method of coding they use to build websites. We put on a seatbelt when we get in a car. We measure when we cook. We wash our hands to kill germs. There seems to be a method for just about everything. We have learned over the last few weeks that for Methodist spirituality is based on methods for developing our faith. The method includes putting our faith into action by doing no harm, doing good, and staying connected to God through devotions, prayer, worship, reading the Bible, communion, and fasting. The method also includes accountability, that is we hold each other accountable for doing no harm, doing good, and staying connected to God.

Accountability is a method that is built into just about every job. We have to answer to someone for the work we do. Yet, in many Christian circles we have become reluctant to hold each other accountable for our actions. Part of our job as a church is to be a place where we can say to one another, "I'm really not doing a good job with _____." (Fill in the blank with something from our Christian walk.) I need someone to help me work toward doing a better job." Or the church is to be a place where we can share, "This week in this situation, I was able to do good by _____." (Fill in the blank with something from our Christian walk.) The church is to be a place where we can affirm each other for how we do good or do harm. Another purpose of the church is to bring the knowledge of a need or an injustice. The church can be the place we can seek a response. Part of our method is to be able to bring our struggles in being a follower of Christ to our fellow Christians and say, "Can I talk with you about this? I don't know what I am to be doing about it." Or, "I have heard about this situation, can you help me discern if God is calling me to do something about it?" This is what Methodist spirituality is all about. We strive to find ways among us to put our faith into action as well as support and encourage each other as we do it. We put our faith into action.

Being a Christian is more than proclaiming Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Just saying it, is not enough. With claiming our faith in Jesus, comes responsibility. This is the theme of the Letter of James. James, the brother of Jesus, was writing to Jews who came to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and lived outside of Jerusalem. The Roman Empire was beginning to persecute both Jews and Christians. James encourages them to keep the faith, to be humble, and to live the teachings of Jesus. They were to be about doing the good works by sharing God's love and caring for others. This was how they could witness their faith to their Roman oppressors. For James, believing and doing go together. Saying, "I believe in Jesus," and then tearing another apart behind their backs or to their face, is not showing one's faith. Knowing that there is a need or seeing an injustice and then laughing at the person or situation, is not showing one's faith. In fact in both instances James would question if this person has faith at all! Being faithful to God is doing good and not harm.

John Wesley stated that because God is faithful to us, we are to commit ourselves to God. We formally do this in the UMC baptismal covenant (p. 34 UMH). We commit ourselves to Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. We also commit to: resisting evil, injustice, and oppression and we commit to: serving Jesus through the church which he has opened to everyone: all ages, nations, and races. We trust in him and he trusts us to do no harm and to do good. Our Baptismal Covenant is one of personal faith in action. As we live this out through the church, United Methodists over the years have forged ways for the church to be faith in action. One of them is through the General Board of Global Ministries (GBMC). This agency of the church is the church's mission arm. They connect us to mission first by making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, second to alleviate human suffering, and third, seek justice, freedom, and peace. Being in mission requires presence, so this agency has sent 300 missionaries to 60 countries. They serve as doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, social workers, and pastors. Each missionary is sponsored by local churches who commit to funding them on an annual basis. Salem currently does not sponsor a United Methodist missionary. GBMC also begins new churches throughout the world. In the last

few years close to 500 churches were started in Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Local congregations like Salem partner with these new churches as a means of financial and spiritual support. Bonds are forged between these two congregations. GBMC also responds to disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and famine through the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). This agency is one of the first groups to respond when a disaster occurs. They provide resources for both recovery efforts such as flood buckets, volunteers to help with clean up, and money to assist with the recovery efforts. Another mission effort of GBMC was to raise \$75 million to help eradicate malaria. This money is providing malaria treatment, education, and assisting with its prevention. These are just some examples of how the United Methodist Church is doing good and putting our faith into action.

Another agency that puts our faith into action is the Board of Church and Society. Their mission is to advocate the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the church and society by bringing healing in the midst of strife, justice in the midst of brokenness, and love in the midst of hate. Methodists have historically been concerned about social justice. For instance, Methodists opposed the slave trade and the cruel treatment of prisoners. Every four years, the General Conference addresses human issues in our current world situation by approving The Social Principles. These are not church law. However, The Social Principles are based on biblical and theological principles. They provide a way that the church can be in prayerful dialogue on how we put our faith into practice. Areas that are covered in The Social Principles are concerns for our Natural World, our Nurturing Community, Social Community, Economic Community, Political Community, and our World Community. The Board of Church and Society is a public witness and advocates for social justice outlined in The Social Principles.

This past spring our General Conference made some changes to The Social Principles. They include: under the topic of “Bullying” this was added: “We encourage churches to adopt a policy of zero tolerance for bullying, including cyber-bullying” and “We affirm the right of all people regardless of gender, socio-economic status, race, religion, disability, age, physical appearance, sexual orientation and gender identity to be free of unwanted aggressive behavior and harmful control tactics.”

Under Family Violence this was added we are “to work with the abuser to understand the root causes and forms of abuse and to overcome such behaviors” and “Regardless of the cause or the abuse, both the victim and the abuser need the love of the church. While we deplore the actions of the abuser, we affirm that person to be in need of God’s redeeming love.”

A new section was created called Culture and Identity. It states, “We affirm that no identity or culture has more legitimacy than any other. We call the Church to challenge any hierarchy of cultures or identities. Through relationships within and among cultures we are called to and have the responsibility for learning from each other showing mutual respect for our differences and similarities as we experience the diversity of perspective and viewpoints.”

Under Racism, the Rights of Racial and Ethnic Persons was amended by adding “In many cultures white persons are granted unearned privileges and benefits that are denied to persons of color. We oppose the creation of a racial hierarchy in any culture. Racism breeds racial discrimination” and “We commit the church to move beyond symbolic expressions and representative modes that do not challenge unjust systems of power and access.”

Under Immigration, the “Rights of Immigrants” was added “We oppose all national immigration policies that separate family members from each other or that include detention of families with children, and we call on local churches to be in ministry with immigrant families.”

These two agencies of the UM Church are just some of the ways we, as a denomination, put our faith into action. We put our faith into action both through the church and how we live as individuals in the world. Jesus stated that we can do the impossible, if we have faith. Eugene Peterson’s biblical version, *The Message*, has Jesus say, “If you have a bare kernel of faith, say the size of a poppy seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, ‘Go jump in the lake,’ and it would do it.” As a denomination, as congregation, as individual disciples of Christ, when we put our faith into action, the impossible of doing no harm and doing good can become a reality in our world. How do you put your faith into action? How do we at Salem put our faith into action as a church? Are there ways we could do this in a more effectively?

References: *The 2012 Discipline of the United Methodist Church*; www.umc.org; Global Ministries, www.umcmmission.org; General Board of Church and Society, umc-gbcs.org