

Sermon: *Grace, Mercy, Potlucks and Perfection* May 29, 2016

Sing to the Lord a new song! Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord! Bless God's name! Share the news of God's saving work every single day! Declare God's glory among the nations; declare God's wondrous works among all people because the Lord is great and so worthy of praise. God is awesome beyond all other gods because all the gods of the nations are just idols, but it is the Lord who created heaven! Greatness and grandeur are in front of God; strength and beauty are in God's sanctuary. Give to the Lord, all families of the nations - give to the Lord glory and power! Give to the Lord the glory due God's name! Bring gifts! Enter God's courtyards! Bow down to the Lord in God's holy splendor! Tremble before God, all the earth! Tell the nations "The Lord rules! Yes, the Lord set the world firmly in place; it won't be shaken. The Lord will judge all people fairly." Let heaven celebrate! Let the earth rejoice! Let the sea and everything in it roar! Let the countryside and everything in it celebrate! Then all the trees of the forest too will shout out joyfully before the Lord because God is coming! God is coming to establish justice on the earth! God will establish justice in the world rightly. God will establish justice among all people fairly. Psalm 96

When Jesus finished speaking to the people, He entered Capernaum. A Roman captain there had a servant who was on his deathbed. He prized him highly and didn't want to lose him. When he heard Jesus was back, he sent leaders from the Jewish community asking Jesus to come and heal his servant. They came to Jesus and urged Him to do it, saying, "He deserves this. He loves our people. He even built our meeting place." Jesus went with them. When He was still quite far from the house, the captain sent friends to tell Him, "Master, You don't have to go to all this trouble. I'm not that good a person, you know. I'd be embarrassed for You to come to my house, even embarrassed to come to You in person. Just give the order and my servant will get well. I'm a man under orders; I also give orders. I tell one soldier, 'Go,' and he goes; another, 'Come,' and he comes; my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." Taken aback, Jesus addressed the accompanying crowd: "I've yet to come across this kind of simple trust anywhere in Israel, the very people who are supposed to know about God and how God works." When the messengers got back home, they found the servant up and well. Luke 7:1-10

Thank God I'm a Methodist

Well, the Methodist Church is kind o' laid back
There isn't an opinion that Methodists lack
We're kind of like-champagne with a Big Mac
Thank God I'm a Methodist

Well thank you John Wesley we owe it all to you
For founding our church though you didn't mean to
But what else-could-an Anglican evangelist do
Thank God I'm a Methodist

Well if you want to eat just come around here

Thirty-seven potlucks already this year
The thought of tuna casserole-makes-me-want to shed a tear
Thank God I'm a Methodist

Well, you just might say our church is rockin'
We're a'clapping and a' praisin' and everyone is talkin'
'Bout a man named Jesus and His voice we hear a' callin'
Thank God I'm a Methodist!

Just two weeks ago the General Conference of the United Methodist Church met in Portland to discuss the future of our church. Thousands gathered at General Conference - United Methodists from around the world - seeking a common love-language in the midst of our diverse beliefs and conflict-ridden cultural understanding. When there are people at the same table or in the same pew both passionately advocating... some for change and some for things to stay the same... there is tension and disappointment and some heartbreak. Many people who attended General Conference reported on some of that heartbreak. Some talked about seeing the end the road for us as a united-United Methodist Church and the possibility of a split. Feelings ran high during General Conference - in Portland, Oregon, where it was held - and in our local churches. I prayed more for the people called United Methodist during those ten days of General Conference than any other time in my life. And I've thought quite a bit about what I love about my church, including grace, mercy, potlucks, and perfection.

This morning's gospel lesson is about faith and healing, and it's about grace. Jesus healed to show God's grace, God's bountiful, endless love and compassion for humanity. We are not all healed of physically, but we can all be healed of our sin and brokenness (which we know is a lifelong process.) Because God continues to heal me of my sinfulness and brokenness; because I know the undeserved love and mercy of

Jesus Christ; and because I experience the presence of the Holy Spirit; I love the Methodist emphasis on grace. Grace is God's loving-kindness and favor for us.

John Wesley was an Anglican priest whose passion and intention was to call the Anglican Church back to holiness and biblical living through practices of grace and mercy. But the Anglicans asked Wesley to leave them alone, and so a new denomination was formed, the Methodists, so-named because of the methodical way Wesley and his friends and followers practiced their faith.

Wesley believed that God's grace is experienced in three ways: Preventive Grace, Justifying Grace, and Sanctifying Grace. (Although there is only one grace, just as there is only one God, experienced as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.) Preventive Grace is one of the most important forms of grace... and very distinctively Methodist. Some faith traditions are punishment-based rather than grace-based. But directly opposed to predestination, which is the belief that because of God's foreknowledge of all events, at the beginning of time God has chosen who will be saved and who will not; preventive grace is the belief that God loves us from our very beginning. Methodists believe that before we are even aware of God's love, God is loving us, wooing us, and blessing us. Preventive Grace is sometimes seen as the front porch of a home we may not recognize as our true home. It's just somewhere inviting to be. Say this with me: Before I even knew it... God has always loved me. (That's Preventive Grace.)

Justifying grace is that moment or experience of saying "Yes!" to God. It's called being born again, or asking Jesus into our hearts, or making a decision for Christ. Whatever you call it, whatever that unique experience has been for you, Justifying Grace is recognizing and accepting God's love and faithfulness, and confessing our

sinfulness, our inability to really love God, others, and ourselves. It's admitting that we need a Savior, that we're incapable of helping and healing ourselves. It's inviting Jesus to do God's saving work in us. Justifying grace is sometimes pictured as a threshold that we cross, the door of the house we come into... into a life of faith. Say this with me: I'm a sinner... I can't save myself... I need You, Lord. (That's Justifying Grace.)

Sanctifying grace is making a home, a life, with God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - inviting them to be present and active in us. We Methodists practice grace, rather than just passively accepting it. Wesley taught his followers to "stand under the doorway of grace," that is to practice the means of grace in order to experience more of God's grace.

Means of grace are worship, the sacraments of Holy Communion and baptism, reading scripture, prayer (alone and with others), holy conversation, and thanksgiving. You probably have other means of grace... ways to experience the presence and loving-kindness of God... but these are the classics. I challenge you to stand under the doorway of grace and let God's mercy, love, and presence fill you up to overflowing!

Some faith traditions teach that we have to prove ourselves; that we are, from our very beginning, depraved and sinful. Methodism teaches us that from our very beginning we are God's beloved and that God's grace is always here for us. Are we all sinners? Are we all broken? Yes. And God's heart is always open to us; God's love is always reaching for us. Grace is always available to us. Thank God I'm a Methodist!

Mercy most commonly means pardon; as in to "have mercy" on someone. But Methodists understand mercy as the ways we love the world - in the same way God

loves us, and in what God wants for all God's children: hope, love, justice, freedom, and peace.

In order to teach people how to be Christian, how to experience God's grace, Wesley formed small groups, called "class meetings" where men and women gathered weekly to report on how they practiced "Means of Grace" (standing under that doorway of grace) and "Works of Mercy" (how they were caring for the needs of the world.) Every small group in the church had their own mission project! Every small group... in the church... was in mission... and practiced together the "Means of Grace" and the "Works of Mercy." We United Methodists believe that the Great Commandment (to love God with everything we are and to love our neighbor the way we love ourselves) is fulfilled in practicing "Means of Grace" and the "Works of Mercy." Thank God I'm a Methodist!

Two weeks ago we had an amazing worship service led by the Service Team... Hanna Straw, Jan Jones, Joe Darrell, Robyn Roberts and Pat Hershey witnessed to us about the ways they practiced "Works of Mercy" in Uganda, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica; in Contra Costa and Solano Counties; and around the world. Ginny Horner showed us "flat dolls" that Stitch-in-Time is making to fit in the pockets of dresses they'll make for the "Dress A Girl Around the World" ministry.

We love... John's gospel tells us... we love and serve others because we find and come to understand and experience that we are so generously loved by God. Many people in our congregation inspire me through their "Works of Mercy" and give me a reason to say: Thank God I'm a Methodist! Let's say this together: I love and serve... because I am loved... by God. (That's Mercy.)

Christians are called “The Body of Christ” which tells us that every one of us is important... vital, actually, to our health and well-being as a community. One of the ways we practice community is through hospitality, and eating together. Potlucks are as much a part of the Methodist Church as singing. (We are a singing people.... John Wesley practiced and preached and crafted Methodist theology, and his brother, Charles - who wrote over 8,000 hymns - set it to music.)

We host the rotating homeless shelter, Winter Nights, and people from our congregation bring food to feed the families who stay here, and sit and eat with those families. Almost every year we host a holiday meal and invite the extended community to sit down and eat with us. Sharing meals, and potlucks in particular, is something I love about being Methodist. Let’s say this together [Get ready to fill in the last word yourself] My favorite potluck dish is... Thank God I’m a Methodist!

When Carolyn Talmadge (Isaiah and Clara’s mommy) and I were ordained, Bishop Brown asked us ordinands John Wesley’s historic questions. One of them was: “Are you going on to perfection?” With varying degrees of conviction all of us answered, “Yes.” Perfection is an idea unique to Methodist theology. Wesley believed that there are no limits to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit to instill in us, to form in us, single-minded love for God... and that in this life we could have perfect love for God and for neighbor. He believed that practicing a disciplined Christian life would lead to Christian perfection. Wesley’s idea of heaven was not pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die but instead (as Jesus said, “the kingdom of God is among you)... in the ways Christians experience and express Christ’s love here on earth.

Protestant Christians are leery of fundamentalist beliefs and bible-thumpers and doorbell-ringers, and yet John Wesley was branded as an “enthusiast” and an “evangelical.” We are not people of lukewarm beliefs or expressions of faith. I find the idea of going on to Christian Perfection refreshing in this day of waning interest in practical and practicing Christianity. Let’s say this together: The Holy Spirit... is working God’s perfect love... in me. (That’s going onto Perfection.) Thank God I’m a Methodist!

In today’s gospel lesson Jesus healed the servant of a Gentile soldier. Just going into the house of a Gentile would have made Jesus, an observant Jew, unclean. But Jesus had no time for labels, for who was on the right side or the wrong side, who was religious and who was not. Jesus was looking for people who had faith, for souls hungry for God’s love. As the United Methodist Church continues to pray and seek God’s will and God’s way, let’s practice our faith Means of Grace, Works of Mercy, Potlucks... and going towards Perfection.

Our Prayer Song is “He Touched Me” and I invite you to stand as you’re able as we sing it together.