

January 14, 2018

What is a Methodist?
A Methodist Loves God!
Matthew 22:36-38

Opening words: There are eighty million Methodists in the world today. Each one can be traced back to John Wesley and his Aldersgate experience, when he was touched by the Holy Spirit. We are part of the largest Methodist group, The United Methodist Church. There are twelve million United Methodists in the world, and more than 6.9 million United Methodists live within the United States, clustered in approximately 35,000 congregations. Those numbers are impressive, but many Methodists don't have a clear understanding of what it means to be a Methodist. Maybe that is your story?

Today, I begin a five-part sermon series called *What is a Methodist?* We are not going to be looking at our history, our administrative structure, or our rules. We are going to be looking at the core values of Methodism. Wesley, himself, identified them for us in a document he wrote called *The Character of a Methodist*. There are five. Today, we look at the first one, *A Methodist Loves God!* Our scripture reading for today is Matthew 22:36-38.

Matthew 22:36-38 ³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" ³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'" ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

George Sand once wrote, "*There is only one happiness in this world, to love and to be loved.*" I believe he is right! If you can think of one person who loves you, say, "**Amen!**" If you can think of one person who you love, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the twenty-second chapter of Matthew. That means it is late in Jesus's earthly ministry. As a matter of fact, it is Holy Week and Jesus is being confronted by Jewish leaders one last time. Our story for today is not unique to Matthew. It is also found in the twelfth chapter of Mark. In that version, the Jewish leaders seem to be more accepting of Jesus. In Matthew's version, the Jewish leaders are more attacking.

Regardless, the question remains the same, "which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Without hesitation, Jesus answers them by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5. That verse was part of what is called the *Shema*, one of the basic creeds of the Jewish faith. It is

still recited daily in orthodox Jewish homes. It is the first text every Jewish child commits to memory. It means we must be totally in love with God, a love that dominates our emotions, and dominates our thoughts and our actions. In this way, the Jewish faith and the Christian faith are the same. Both religions start with an overwhelming love for God. It is the core of everything we do. It is impossible to be a Christian and not love God. John Wesley understood that it was impossible to be a Methodist, and not love God. Let me say this clearly, there is no substitute for loving God. However, that does not mean we don't have other loves. The question is, why is loving God so important? The answer is quite simple. Your love for God is your only love that is both eternal and uninterrupted. Just think about it for a few moments.

What do these countries have in common?

- East Germany
- Czechoslovakia
- Yugoslavia
- Tibet
- Prussia
- Ottoman Empire
- Roman Empire

The answer is, none of these countries still exist. At one time they were recognized by the other countries in the world, but no longer. The Ottoman Empire lasted 623 years, but it no longer exists. The Roman Empire lasted 2,000 years, but no longer. The oldest country in the world is also one of the smallest countries in the world: San Marino, on the Italian peninsula. It started in 1631. I don't want to offend your patriotism, but history tells us countries are temporary, not eternal.

It is a good thing to love your country! However, that love is not good enough. At the moment you die, or at the moment your country ends, your valued citizenship becomes a secondary issue. It is a good thing to love the United States of America, but your love of America is not a substitute for loving God. God is eternal; countries are not. And all of God's loving people said, "**Amen!**"

I was born in 1957. I was the youngest of three children. There were five of us. There was my father, there was my mother, and there were my twin sisters. I now have my own family, but that was my first family. In 1996, my father died. In 2002, my mother died. In 2016, my sister Janet died. My family of five is now down to two. I officiated at my sister's funeral. When her funeral was over, my sister Susan came up to me. It was an emotional moment. We hugged each other, and Susan whispered in my ear, "It is just the two of us now. Let's stick around for a while." Can I ask you a painful question? How many in your family have died?

It is a good thing to love your family! However, that love is not good enough. Your family is made up of people, and people die. We grieve because death interrupts our relationship with them, until we ourselves pass. It is a good thing to love your family,

but it is not a substitute for loving God. Only your love for God is both eternal and uninterrupted. And all of God's loving people said, "**Amen!**"

From 1989 to 1994, I was the pastor of the Hathaway United Methodist Church in Garfield Heights. I have nothing negative to say about that congregation. They were good to me and they were good to my family. That church had the one thing this church doesn't have, visibility. They were located on a primary road; we are located on a secondary road. They made a lot of progress in our years together. They had no excuse to fail. That is why I was shocked to find out two years ago that they were closing. They did not close because of a lack of hard work or lack of love. Churches close for a variety of reasons. We have talked about those reasons in the past.

It is a good thing to love your church! However, that love is not good enough. The good people at Hathaway will tell you, loving your church isn't enough. In a cynical world, it is easy to see. The church is just a building, or an organization. Did you know, according to the Huffington Post, somewhere between 4,000 and 7,000 churches close annually? Did you know all the congregations Paul wrote to in the New Testament are now closed? Churches are temporary, but God is eternal. And all of God's loving people said, "**Amen!**"

Martin Thielen serves as senior pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Lebanon, Tennessee. On a website called Ministry Matters, he shared this sermon illustration about loving God. He called it "The Perfect Life". It makes my point perfectly.

As the story goes, Steve and Lisa met and fell in love while earning their MBAs at a leading university. Young, sharp, and highly motivated, they shared a common goal to succeed in business, make a lot of money, and live the American dream. Immediately after receiving their MBA degrees, Steve and Lisa married. Soon thereafter they accepted business positions in a large city. A decade later, they found themselves living the American dream. They were working long hours and making large salaries. They didn't like the long hours, but they enjoyed the money. To be more exact, they liked spending their money. They had quite a collection. They bought a large house in a fashionable part of the city. Between the two of them, they owned four cars. They bought a cabin in the mountains about an hour outside the city. They purchased a boat. Their entire lives focused on their careers and their possessions. They were living the American dream!

When Steve and Lisa were nearing the age of forty, time itself started to change them. The only thing they needed to complete the American dream was a baby. Lisa's biological clock was ticking louder every year. Their son was born about a year later. They named him Nathan. Steve and Lisa had it all—youth, success, money, and now a beautiful child. The problem was, they worked tremendous hours, so Nathan spent most of his time in daycare. A nanny cared for him most evenings. Steve and Lisa rarely spent time together and had minimal contact with their son. And, because of their busy

schedules, they had virtually no time for friends, community affairs, or church. By the time Nathan was a year old, Steve and Lisa hit a crisis point. They asked themselves, "Is this all there is to life? Do we really want to put in endless hours at work to make more money and buy more stuff?"

Eventually Steve and Lisa realized that climbing the corporate ladder of success, making boatloads of money, and buying lots of stuff was not a big enough life. So, they made a life-changing decision. On the same day, they both resigned from their jobs. Steve took a forty-hour-a-week job managing a small business that paid less than half of his corporate salary. Lisa took a part-time job as a business consultant working two days per week, making about 20 percent of her previous income. They sold their huge house and purchased a simple home in a middle-class neighborhood. They also sold their cabin, boat, and two of their four cars. Although their new life proved dramatically different, for Steve and Lisa, less equaled more. They now had time for each other, for Nathan, and for their friends. They also got involved in their community and went back to church. Although they earned substantially less income, life was far richer.

Six years later, when Nathan turned seven years old, his second-grade teacher gave her class a unique assignment. She told each student to write a brief essay and to draw a picture depicting their version of a perfect life. Nathan completed the assignment and turned it in to his teacher. After she graded the assignment, Nathan brought it home, along with some math and spelling worksheets. He laid them on the kitchen table and went out to play with his neighborhood friends. Later, Lisa sat down at the table and picked up Nathan's papers. As she looked at his "perfect life" assignment, tears began to flow down her face. In fact, she began to weep—not out of sadness, but out of joy. Nathan's perfect life project had three sections. First, he drew a picture of his modest house. The drawing included Nathan, his mom and dad, and his dog. Under the drawing of his house he wrote "My home." To the right of his house he drew a checkerboard with faces inside each square. The caption under the drawing read, "My friends." Next to his friends Nathan drew a picture of a church with a steeple. The caption read, "My church." Under the three pictures of his home, friends, and church, Nathan wrote his brief essay. He said, "A perfect life for me is the life that I'm in right now. I have a lot of friends, and a good family too, and a good church. I do not need a perfect life. I already have a perfect life." Can I ask you a question?

What is your perfect life? I bet, your perfect life is filled with all kinds of love. You love, and you are loved by, your neighbors. You love, and you are loved by, your family. You love, and you are loved by, your church. You can have all that love, and it will still not be a perfect life, until you love God with all your heart, mind, and soul. His is the only love that is both uninterrupted and eternal. Do you remember what George Sand once wrote? He said, "*There is only one happiness in this world, to love and to be loved.*" And all of God's loving people said, "**Amen!**"