

January 21, 2018

What is a Methodist?

A Methodist Rejoices in God!

Philippians 4:4-7

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, sanctified, and set apart by God. We are part of the largest Methodist group, the United Methodist Church. There are twelve million United Methodists in the world. More than 6.9 million United Methodists live within the United States, clustered in approximately 35,000 congregations. However, many Methodists don't have a clear understanding of what it means to be a Methodist. Maybe that is your story?

Last week, I began a five-part sermon series called *What is a Methodist?* We are not going to be looking at our history, our administrative structure, our appointment process, our apportionments, or our rules. We are looking at our core values. Wesley, himself, identified them for us in a document he wrote called *The Characteristics of a Methodist*. There are five. Last week, we looked at the first one, *A Methodist Loves God!* Today, we look at the second one, *A Methodist Rejoices in God!* Our scripture reading for today is Philippians 4:4-7.

Philippians 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The August 6, 1992 issue of *Our Daily Bread* told the story of an early missionary named John G. Paton. He had just arrived on the Hebrides islands, in the south Pacific. Upon his arrival, he was told he was going to be a father. He was thrilled, and dreamed of the future. However, that joy was short-lived. To make a long, sad story short, both his wife and his son died during childbirth. Without help, Paton was forced to dig and bury his wife and infant son. Later, he wrote about that experience, "*If it had not been for Jesus and the fellowship and the grace He afforded me, I am certain I would have gone mad or died of grief beside their graves.*" Miraculously, John G. Paton survived and lived the rest of his life at peace with God. I find that to be a great story. It reminds me of William A. Ward's quote, "*We should be thankful for our tears: They prepare us for a clearer vision of God.*" I am not so sure I like that quote, but he may be right. If you don't like that quote, but you fear it is correct, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the epistle to the Philippians. To understand this morning's text, you must understand the background. This letter was written by the Apostle Paul

about the year A.D. 61, from Rome. He writes this letter for one reason, to thank them for a gift they had sent him. However, he takes this opportunity to update them on his present status, encourage them in the faith, and challenge them to remain unified. While all of this is interesting, the one piece of background information which brings this passage to life is the location of its writing. Paul writes this epistle when he is incarcerated. The truth is, Paul is not locked up in a stale prison cell. Instead, Paul is writing this epistle while he is under house arrest. He is in a house he rented while in Rome. Today, Paul would have been at home with an electronic bracelet around his ankle. Those were simpler times. However, that does not mean that Paul's arrest was not upsetting. He did not live in an "innocent until proven guilty" world. His future was very uncertain. Paul could have been arrested and executed at a moment's notice. Can you imagine the level of Paul's stress? Yet, despite his temporary situation, Paul writes these eternal words of hope:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

I have spent this week wrestling with this passage, considering the background. How could he write such hopeful words in such a dark period of his life? This is not the first time I have wrestled with this text. Years ago, I learned that the secret of unlocking this passage was understanding the word *rejoice* in the passage. It is not an easy word, or passage, to understand. It is important that you listen to the next line.

To "Rejoice in the Lord" does not mean you will never feel depressed or down. In other words, the word *rejoice*, in this case, is not linked to an emotion. The Bible is filled with all kinds of emotions. The shortest verse in the English New Testament is John 11:35, "*Jesus wept.*" In Romans 12:15, Paul tells us, "*to weep with those who weep.*" The Bible also tells us we should mourn over sin (James 4:9; 5:1). Even in this world, we rejoice when our favorite team wins, but we mourn the next week when they are defeated. The word "rejoice" can't be linked to an emotion, because emotions are so temporary. In this passage, the word *rejoice* is complex. The problem is, the Greek word that Paul uses for rejoicing in the original text is complex.

When I was in seminary, I took several classes in New Testament Greek. I'm not saying I'm an expert in New Testament Greek. I'm just saying I took a few classes in Greek. The class was taught by a man by the name of Randy Richardson. At the time, he was a teaching fellow at Asbury Theological Seminary. He had received his M.A. from Indiana State University, and did more graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. I learned this week that he is now on staff, teaching Greek, at Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky. Education is important, but this is more important to me: Randy was a good guy, with a wonderful Christian spirit. He was honest with us and told us that Greek was not an easy language to study, for several reasons. One of the reasons was the Greek words themselves. Certain words from language to language don't match exactly. Some words, like "Jesus", do. Some words, like "rejoice", don't.

Some English words only hold a majority of the meaning of the Greek word. That is the case in "rejoice". There is an emotional side to the word, but there are other sides.

There is an obedient side to the Greek word for rejoice. That is why Paul repeats it, *I say again, rejoice*. We choose whether we are going to rejoice in the Lord in all circumstances. That is where our Christian roots are so important. When we are disappointed by people, or when we are disappointed by circumstances, the choice is ours. Will we obey the command to rejoice in the Lord, or will we allow ourselves to be swept away by our emotions? Paul himself is the living illustration to this point. He is under house arrest, facing an uncertain future, yet he chooses to rejoice in the Lord. There is an obedience side to the Greek word for rejoice, yet there is more. You can look at it another way.

There is a contentment side to the Greek word for rejoice. Under the surface of our lives as Christians is the abiding confidence that God is sovereign. It is God who is in control, and it is God who is directing our lives. We would like God to eliminate all the problems and disappointments in our lives, but that just doesn't happen. There comes a point in life when you must decide. You can be mad at God, or you can trust God. That is God's desire. Proverbs 3:5 says, *Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not rely on your own understanding*. The choice is yours. As a Methodist, we rejoice in God, because we have chosen to trust Him. How easy it is for some to get mad at God. How easy it is to walk away from God.

Do you remember the story of Ted Turner? We have talked about him in the recent past. I am not picking on him, but he does illustrate the point, again. After all, Ted Turner couldn't care less about what I say about him. Today, he is rich beyond belief. He made his money when cable television exploded onto the American scene. It is safe to say, he is never going to starve. This is his story: He was born and raised in a Christian home. He admits he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior several times, and, at one point, considered going into the mission field. That all changed when Ted Turner's sister grew ill. Everyone understood the severity of the situation, so everyone prayed that God would heal her. Ted prayed for his sister, but the healing never came. She died, and Ted was devastated. In time, he found himself mad at God. Years later, Ted Turner is still mad at God. Today, Ted Turner is 79 years old and mad at God. He doesn't believe there is a God. Don't get me wrong. Ted Turner has done some good things in his life. He is a great philanthropist, helping countless people. But, that doesn't change the bottom line. He is 79 years old and doesn't even believe God exists. No one forced him to walk away from God; it was his own choice. He isn't the only one.

Listen to this list of celebrities:

- Woody Allen
- Kathy Griffin
- Brad Pitt
- Daniel Radcliffe
- Morgan Freeman

Jodi Foster
Larry King
Seth Macfarlane
Helen Mirren
Kevin Bacon

Each one of these living celebrities has chosen not to believe in God. That list came from the internet, so I know it is true 😊. That list is not complete. There are others. Charlie Chaplin, Katherine Hepburn, and George Carlin died as atheists. None of them is, or was, rejoicing in the Lord. It was their choice. I am not saying any of these celebrities were, or are, bad people. I am sure they were, or are, talented people. I am not saying they were not generous. I hope they have helped many. What I am saying is that each one has rejected God for what they consider to be a good reason. Can I ask you these two questions?

Do you know anyone who is mad at God?

Do you know of anyone who has rejected God?

Just like the list of celebrities, the people who pop into your mind are not bad people. They are simply lost, or confused. By your presence here today, I am assuming you are not lost or confused. By your presence here today, I am assuming you are living your complex life, filled with challenges and disappointments, rejoicing in God. That is one of the characteristics of a true Methodist. By your presence here today, you are much more like Jim and Anita, than you are Ted Turner. You have decided to rejoice in God, and not walk away from God.

Jim and Anita were parishioners of mine in a former church. I got to know them as they planned their wedding. It was a great day, but their joy didn't last long. Over a year later, I sat with Jim and Anita and helped them plan their baby's funeral. There were no words to comfort them. They were broken. There were no words to comfort them several months later, when Anita's mother died from cancer. There were no words to comfort them when, days later, her father took his own life. He just couldn't live without his bride. Jim and Anita had nowhere to go but up. They began their ascent on the last Sunday I served that church. There they sat, side by side, worshipping God and rejoicing in His presence. It was their choice to come. I said to them, "It is good to see you here." She responded, "We had to come. We have nowhere else to go." Maybe that is your story? You don't come to church because your life is perfect. You come to church because your life is imperfect. You come to church because there is nowhere else to go. A Methodist rejoices in God always. Do you remember the words of William A. Ward? "*We should be thankful for our tears: They prepare us for a clearer vision of God.*" He may be right. You are a Methodist, and a Methodist rejoices in God always. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"