

February 11, 2018

What is a Methodist?
A Methodist Loves Others!
John 15:5-12

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 for a special purpose. As United Methodists, we are part of the largest group of Methodists. There are twelve million United Methodists in the world. More than 6.9 million United Methodists live in 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?

Today, I conclude my five-part sermon series, *What is a Methodist?* We have not been looking at our history, our administrative structure, our appointment process, our apportionment formula, or our rules. We are looking at our core values. Wesley, himself, identified them for us in a document he wrote called *The Character of a Methodist*. According to him, there are five marks of a Methodist: *A Methodist Loves God! A Methodist Rejoices in God! A Methodist Thanks God! And, A Methodist Prays Constantly!* Today, we are going to look at the last one: *A Methodist Loves Others!* Our Gospel reading for today is John 15:5-12.

John 15:5-12 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. ⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

William Gladstone (1809-1898) served as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom for twelve years in the nineteenth century. He had the sad responsibility of announcing the death of Queen Victoria's third child, Princess Alice (1843-1878), to the House of Commons. The story is tragic. Princess Alice's daughter had contracted diphtheria. The

doctors said kissing her daughter would endanger her own life. That sounded simple, but it was hard to do. As the little girl struggled to breathe, Princess Alice forgot about herself and took the little one into her arms to keep her from choking. Rasping and struggling for her life, the child said, "Momma, kiss me!" Without thinking of herself, the mother tenderly kissed her daughter. The worst happened. Princess Alice got diphtheria and died several days later. That sad story makes a simple point. Real love forgets self, and knows no bounds. Real love doesn't count the cost. Real love, sacrificial love, is rarely seen. Yet, this is the kind of love Jesus expects from us. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** John Wesley said it clearly. A Methodist loves others, and you are a Methodist!

We find ourselves this morning in the Gospel of John. You may know the background. The author of this Gospel was the disciple whom Jesus loved, John. He penned this Gospel around the year AD 85. He wrote for his Greek-thinking audience. It was written to prove one thing: Jesus was the long-awaited Christ, the Son of God. It is John who gives us the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16, *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.* It summarizes the Bible in one verse.

Our scripture reading for today comes from the fifteenth chapter of John. Much has already happened. It is Holy Week, and Jesus's appointment with the cross is near. With little time left, Jesus only talks about what is truly important. What is truly important to Jesus is love. Listen to what I am about to say. The kind of love that Jesus is speaking of has nothing to do with a box of candy, a fistful of flowers, or heart-covered boxer shorts. Jesus is speaking of sacrificial love. Just think about it for a moment. The person you love the most is the same person you have sacrificed for the most. Jesus, himself, would demonstrate sacrificial love when he went to the cross for the salvation of mankind. Jesus does not ask us to do anything he wouldn't do. He expects us to love sacrificially too. It is one of the great goals of our faith. Sacrificial is an easy concept to understand, but it is a hard concept to apply. But, that does not excuse us from trying. It is safe to say, we have a way to go. If you agree, say, **"Amen!"** Can I state the obvious? We don't just have a hard time loving one another, we have a hard time tolerating one another. How many examples do you need?

Charles Drew was a brilliant medical doctor. His discovery of blood plasma saved thousands of lives in World War II, Korea, and the Vietnam War. At Pearl Harbor, for example, 96% of those who received plasma survived. Dr. Drew's accomplishment did not go unnoticed. After World War II, he was named director of the National Blood Bank Program and devoted himself to teaching doctors at Howard University Medical School. That is what makes the rest of the story so cruel. On April 1, 1950, while driving some young doctors to a conference, Dr. Drew was involved in an automobile accident in Burlington, N.C. He was rushed to a hospital, where his life could have been saved by plasma. But, Dr. Drew was denied admission to that hospital because his skin was dark. He died on the way to another hospital 26 miles away. I find that story to be very

upsetting. I would like to say it is an isolated situation, but I can't. The pages of American history, a Christian country, are stained with racism. We don't just have a hard time loving other races, we have a hard time tolerating other races. It is like we are deaf to Jesus's words. The Master said we are to love one another. It isn't just other races. It seems to be every group that is different from us.

In contemporary America, there is tension between every group. There is tension between the young and the not-so-young. There is tension between the educated and the uneducated. There is tension between Wall Street and Main Street. There is tension between the employed, underemployed and unemployed. There is tension between Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives. There is a tension between Washington DC and the rest of the country. There is tension between the technologically advanced and the technologically challenged. There is tension between those who live in the city and those who live outside of the city. Show me the demographic group and I will show you their rival. In America, we have no shortage of tension. We feel good if we tolerate one another. The problem is, Jesus said we are to love one another. It is like we are deaf to Jesus's words. I hate to say it, but it even happens in my own pious circles.

The Resident Bishop of the East Ohio Annual Conference is Tracy Malone. I only met her once; she seems very nice. The bishop I knew better was our former Bishop, John Hopkins. He is retired. Every bishop has the same job, with a different agenda. Bishop Hopkins required all clergy to participate in something called Compass Groups. They still linger on. They consist of pastors from like-size churches within the same geographic area. My Compass Group now consists of pastors from Berlin Center, Canfield, Howland, Poland, and Salem. Under protest, we meet regularly. The group keeps changing. Each time we meet, there is a different topic to discuss.

One day we talked about weddings. It sounds simple, but we made it complex. Everyone had a different opinion about weddings. Like baptisms and funerals, I have an open-door policy about weddings. What does that mean? That means, if you ask me to officiate at your wedding, I will do it. Yes, there is a financial side to my policy. It is an excellent part-time job. I have made a good sum of money through the years. However, there is more to it than the money. I have met a small army of people through the years officiating at weddings and funerals. I believe, meeting people in the community is an important part of my job. When my colleagues heard about my open-door policy, they weren't impressed. They started lecturing me on rules and the integrity of the church. I heard a lot about standards. Can I be honest with you? I didn't hear anything. To me, it was noise pollution. Their words fell on deaf ears. By the end of our meeting, the group was divided down the middle. It got to be kind of ugly. Do you know why? Everyone in the group was just like me - competitive, prideful, and opinionated. It is safe to say, love was not present. The best we could do was tolerate one another. The problem is, Jesus commanded us to love one another. Sacrificial love is rare, but it is still the goal. That is important because you are a Methodist and

Methodists love others. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" I wrestled with this next point all week. This is the question you must answer:

Why do we refuse to love other people? The answer is disturbing. We refuse to love sacrificially because we have accepted one of Satan's favorite lies. Satan tells us we are better than others, and we believe it. At the moment we believe we are better than others, we have the license to refuse to love others. The problem is, it is based on a lie. Through the eyes of God, we are all the same. That insight will change the way you look at yourself, and it will change the way you look at others. That insight will help you love others. Did you know that within every Orthodox statement of faith is a line about Christ's return and the final judgment? Why? Because the oldest branch of the Christian church wants to remind the world of the truth. We are not superior to the least or the lost. As a matter of fact, we are no different from the least or the lost. God has accepted us not for what we have done, but God has accepted us because of what Christ has done for us. That fact is hard for us to accept. That is why sacrificial love is so rare.

History tells that Adolf Eichmann (1906-1962) was one of the primary architects of the Holocaust. When he was tried for his war crimes at Nuremberg, Yehiel Dinur, who had survived Auschwitz, faced Eichmann for the first time since leaving the concentration camp. When he saw Eichmann, Dinur sobbed and fainted. Years later, Mike Wallace of 60 Minutes asked Dinur what happened: Was he overcome by hatred or fear or horrid memories? Dinur's answer is stunning. He said he suddenly realized that Eichmann was not some God-like authority in a military uniform who sent thousands to their deaths. He was just an ordinary man. And then, said Dinur, "I was afraid about myself... I saw that I am capable of doing this. I am exactly like he."

At the moment we discover we are like others, love is possible. Through the eyes of God, we are all the same. George Sand once said, "*The is only one happiness in this life, to love and be loved.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" You are a Methodist and a Methodist loves others!