

WHY I AM A UNITED METHODIST
I Timothy 1:1-2, 12-17

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In the early 1800's, after attending a Methodist "frolic of faith" known as a Camp Meeting, somebody wrote this little ditty:

I'm a Methodist, Methodist, Methodist, Methodist,
Eatin' Methodist pie.

I'm a Methodist, Methodist, Methodist, Methodist,
Methodist till I die.

Here at the dawn of the 21st century, nobody is concerned about the makers of the pie and to commit to anything until you die — well, that is scary.

Nevertheless, in this series of sermons on church membership, I would like to share with you my reasons for being a United Methodist Christian. We are not the only show in town, nor should we be. Our forefathers and foremothers were much more interested in practical religion than theological discussion. There are, however, some family traits that characterize the Methodists. If time permits, I will mention five of them today.

UNITED METHODISTS ARE OPEN MINDED

Our founder, John Wesley, was fond of the phrase "think and let think." Our denominational media blitz known as *Igniting Ministry* promotes our identity of "open hearts, open minds, open doors" around the world.

Let me hasten to say that "to think and let think" is first of all an admonition to think. You cannot just believe anything and be a Methodist, as some of our critics would like to say. Beliefs are important, for what we believe determines how we live, move, and connect with others as a community. In essentials, let us seek unity. In non-essentials, let us allow liberty. In all things, let us pursue charity. That is the Methodist way. Let me push that just a little further.

In Essentials, Unity

We believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

We believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the universal church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

We believe not because we have got it all worked out, or because we have conquered all doubt. We believe because God's prevenient grace has wooed us to belief. The scriptures have called us to faith and reason has led us to logical affirmation. The experience of His love has confirmed that we are children of God.

It would be helpful for all of us who practice the faith in the marketplace, if all in leadership, would spend more time proclaiming the faith and less time

denouncing it. In essentials, let us have unity.

In Non-Essentials, Liberty

But in non-essentials, it is our way to express liberty. “Think and let think.” Does the water capacity of a baptismal pool really matter? Is the style of worship or instruments used a barometer of spiritual vitality? Does the frequency of communion determine the faithful? Should the day of worship define a denomination? Is any agreement about the end of the world conclusive? Is the gender of the preacher ordained by God? Must the sexuality of parishioners be declared at the door?

In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things charity. As to opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we “think and let think.” That is why I am a United Methodist Christian today.

UNITED METHODIST ARE WARM-HEARTED

I am a United Methodist Christian today because we believe in a warm-hearted faith. We believe in the experience of God’s grace. On Wednesday, May 24, 1738, a restless, worried, 35-year-old Episcopal priest by the name of John Wesley very unwillingly attended a Bible study on Aldersgate Street in London, England. Let him tell you the rest of the story. “About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation: And an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and no longer was I a servant, I became a son.”

For the people called Methodists, Aldersgate is not simply the name of a street in London, England, nor the name of a church in nearly every city in America. Aldersgate represents a personal, convincing, transforming, heart-warming, Christian experience that empowered one of the greatest spiritual awakenings in the history of the world. It is a part of who we are.

In a *Family Circus* cartoon, Dolly is attending worship with her family. They are sitting on the front row and the congregation is standing and singing, as we did, America’s favorite hymn, “Amazing Grace”. Dolly looks up to her mother and asks, “Exactly what did Grace do that made her so amazing?”

Every once in a while we ought to stop and remember what this unmerited, unearned, unconditional love of God has done for the likes of you and me. Grace hears our cry. Grace forgives our sins. Grace relieves our fears. Grace sets us free. Grace leads us home.

Paul says to Timothy in the lesson we heard today, “*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ was poured out on me abundantly. I, the worst of sinners, was shown mercy displaying Christ’s unlimited patience as an example of one who believes.*” When grace fills a place, a fellowship of concern is sure to follow!

Wesley was not about to savor this experience for himself, nor turn it into a shrine for others to visit. Grace for Wesley was free. “Whosoever will” may receive it. In fact, the hymn his brother wrote on the occasion of John’s conversion has a line that goes something like this: “Outcasts of men to you I call, harlots and publicans and thieves. He spreads his arms to embrace you all, sinners alone his grace receives.” Our new neighbors down the street have a sign on their marquee, “Sinners Welcome.” I love that line. We ought to put it on the marquee of every church in America. I tell you today, if sinners aren’t welcome, we ought to all go home, including the preacher. We are here by the grace of God felt deep in our own souls and lived out in a community that reaches out in love and concern for one another.

Because the church was bogged down with temporal matters, Wesley took his message to the open fields. When people believed, he organized them into societies and class meetings for spiritual support and accountability. Loving hearts set other hearts on fire. I am a United Methodist Christian today because I believe deeply in warm-hearted, experiential religion.

UNITED METHODISTS BELIEVE IN HOLINESS OF HEART AND LIFE

I am a United Methodist Christian today because I believe in the holiness of heart and life lived out in personal piety and in works of mercy for the world.

Wesley had an interesting question that he used to ask. “Are you not happy?” he would say. “Then you are not holy.” I find the wedding of happiness and holiness to be an interesting thing in twenty-first century America. Seldom do we think the two belong together. Happiness and holiness. In my background, some of the most unhappy people I have known have been people of holiness. But Wesley put the two together. “Are you not happy? It’s because you’re not holy,” he said.

Let’s push that a little bit for our time and place. When we take our children or grandchildren to eat at the throne of the golden arches they insist on ordering a happy meal, at least my grandson does. I can say to him, “Why don’t I buy you the chicken McNuggets and the fries and I’ll take you out and buy you a real toy on the way home?” He screams at the top of his voice and says, “No, I want a happy meal!” We are not selling food. We are marketing happiness. The problem with a happy meal is that the happiness soon wears off. As we get older our happy meals get more expensive and it still wears off.

Saturday after Saturday I conduct weddings. I say teasingly to a bride, “What on earth do you see in this guy that makes you think you want to live with him for the rest of your life?” She usually says back to me something like this, “He makes me so very, very happy.” I need to tell you that my success rate at sealing that happiness in holy matrimony is not much better than the national average. If all of our happiness is tied up in somebody else, we are going to wind up a very sad people before we die.

The standard of living in the United States has dramatically increased since World War II. We have more, go more, do more, and see more than ever before. But the polls tell us that the number of people who consider themselves happy has not improved in the last 50 years. I wonder why?

Ah, Mr. Wesley, could you be right? Are you not happy? It is because you are not holy.

What if happiness is connected to personal holiness? What if there is a peace we forfeit, a restless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer? What if George Barna is right in his recent research that reports 82% of Bible readers feel “at peace” with themselves compared to only 58% of those who never read the Bible. It is already a fact that people who worship regularly live longer, healthier lives, on the average, than those who never darken the door of the church.

“If you want to be happy,” said Mr. Wesley, “learn to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.” Then, move out of that personal piety into acts of mercy for the community. If I could paraphrase his ideas, the next time you really want to have a blast or have a blow-out weekend, invest in things that will really last.

Don’t take off to the ballgame—you might come home a loser. Don’t run off to the beach—there could be a storm. If you want, really want to have a blast in life, do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can, for as long as you possibly can. If you really want to live life to its limits, serve the poor, visit the prisons, work for peace and justice, practice good health. I am a United Methodist Christian today because I believe in the holiness of heart and life.

UNITED METHODISTS EMBRACE A VITAL CONNECTION

I am a United Methodist Christian today because I embrace a vital connection. Mr. Wesley had a favorite phrase and it went like this, “The world is my parish.”

In 1973 a seminary student by the name of Bill Hybels and a few friends started a church for the unchurched in the suburbs of Chicago. Today, Willow Creek Community Church is one of the largest churches in the world. But the majority of Mr. Hybels’ time these days is no longer spent pastoring Willow Creek Church. It is spent promoting the Willow Creek Association.

As I sat with a group of us trying to learn some of his principles recently, the light came on for me. He was promoting his Willow Creek Association, which sounds dramatically like a denomination to me. I said to myself: Why would this person, this bright leader of religion in America, who has built his own entrepreneurial kingdom, spend the most effective period of his life building a denomination of his own? Is there at the core of life a need to be together in community? You see, if you make your parish your world, it’s going to get awfully isolated. It won’t work. I find it interesting that the entrepreneurial leaders in churches twenty

years ago are now trying to build connections to provide, in fact, what the denominations have had all along.

Now I need to say to you there is much about our connection I would change if I had the chance. I think it is extremely outdated, woefully inefficient, and way out of touch with the needs of the local church. Certainly at times we have been a lot more interested in preserving our past than embracing God's future, more concerned about saving our system than proclaiming Jesus Christ. The connection however, is deeply needed:

When I read about the AIDS epidemic in Africa, that awful, awful reality in our world, I take a little comfort in knowing that my church is there gathering up the orphans, often taking them into their own homes and trying to create a family for them.

When Hell broke loose a year ago in New York City, I took great comfort in knowing my church was there with its doors flung open and its people trying to minister. I even take more comfort in knowing now, a year later, when all the media has gone, they are still there day after day extending hands of mercy.

When our President stood a year ago to address a broken nation, I took great comfort that our church was there in the person of one of your former pastors.

I take great comfort in knowing that we are connected around the world. We cannot do everything, but we are doing something. I cherish our partnership with the church in Perovo, Russia. We need to finish that project. I cherish our connection with Puebla, Mexico that you have heard about today. I cherish our connection with Hobson in Nashville, and 61st Avenue and other places where we try to build that partnership again. You see, no longer can we live in isolation in our own little world. The world is our parish or we will perish as a people of God.

UNITED METHODISTS BELIEVE IN THE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

I am a United Methodist Christian today because I believe in the assurance of salvation. I need to tell you I don't have time to develop this theme.

Romans 8:16 The spirit himself bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God.

Mr. Wesley's last words on earth were these, "Best of all, God is with us." I want to commend that statement to you. Wherever you are in the journey of life you can have the blessed assurance that you belong to God. You can know where you are going. You can live in the sure and certain confidence that God will see you through. "*There is no fear in love,*" says the New Testament, "*for perfect love*

casts out fear.” You do not have to live in guilt, you do not have to live in fear. You can live in faith as a child of God. That is our belief.

There are many wonderful expressions of the Christian faith on earth. We are not the only Christians on earth, nor should we be. Some will fit your tastes more than others, however, I say to you today, if your heart is with my heart in love and loyalty to Jesus Christ, then take my hand for the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

There are many wonderful expressions of the Christian faith on earth. Some will fit your taste more than others. But if your heart is with my heart, in love and loyalty to Jesus Christ, take my hand for the glory of God and the good of the world.

