

SERMON – “THE SPIRIT OF METHODISM” – APRIL 13, 2008
SCRIPTURES: ACTS 2: 42-47; JOHN 10: 1-10

Every once in a while, I feel compelled to revisit our Methodist roots. Between my conversations leading up to the reception of new members last week, today’s baptism, and my preparation for General Conference reminds me that we can easily lose the beauty of the unique contributions of the Wesleyan or Methodist tradition. Many of you have your personal roots in another tradition or even joined different Christian churches throughout your lifetime and are most likely here because of your experience of this particular congregation rather than the tradition. But guess what! Even if that is the case, you have been formed in a tradition even if it is not spoken of overtly.

I think John Paul would agree with me. Because he and I and the other clergy who have served this church in your lifetime are steeped in the tradition, it is what we have passed on to you in our own ways. I can only speak for myself this morning, but there are some basic roots that have kept me in love with the United Methodist tradition even when the denomination has deeply disappointed me. That’s what I want to share this morning and will continue with next week.

Just a quick basic history: John Wesley was an Anglican priest in England in the 18th century who found himself yearning for the church to be something more than it was. It had its beautiful liturgical tradition but he found it wanting in compassion and spirit. Personally, he had a faith crisis after his failure at parish ministry in Georgia. On his trip home, in the midst of a violent storm, he was moved by the personal faith of the Moravians he traveled with. He had his own personal experience about a year later at Aldersgate Chapel when he reports “his heart was strangely warmed”. His brother Charles had had a similar experience just three days before. They began to go outside of the church and preach in fields and near coal mines and prisons: wherever they found people. They joined with other evangelists, namely following the lead of George Whitefield in this effort and soon they all had huge crowds around them.

He essentially began with one message: he preached about God’s forgiving grace in Jesus Christ. This is what he had experienced that night in Aldersgate and was convinced others needed to hear first. It is a religion, first and foremost of the heart! We have continued that tradition my

friends. First and foremost, you can trust in God to offer you unconditional grace – as we have proclaimed this morning in baptism – each of you is a beloved child of God and you are forgiven for any thought or action that makes you feel separated from that love. We don't earn forgiveness – it is a given – a gift to you from God.

We don't have to do anything to earn that forgiveness, but we do have a response to it. Wesley's understanding of that process of receiving God's grace will lead to the desire to do more loving. His concept of divinity is a practical divinity – that we live out what we believe in what we do and how we act. More on that in just a minute.

The genius of John Wesley was not in what he believed but in how he organized the church. George Whitefield and others were brilliant evangelists – great orators – preachers and could whip up a crowd into a frenzy of enthusiasm, but then they moved on to another town, another crowd.

What John and Charles Wesley added to this movement was organization. From their early days at Oxford, they knew how important it was to have a group to be accountable to - as students, with other students, they had formed a club that followed particular disciplines for prayer and study – they were methodical and became known as “Methodists” – a term of derision placed on them by other students but it stuck and they liked it.

Now with these crowds of persons from every level of society – a few wealthy persons but mostly laborers and the poor, he decided to organize them similarly. They were organized into “societies” – meeting weekly for fellowship, preaching, prayer and hymn-singing – sounds like what we do – doesn't it? Well, they were encouraged to also attend their local Anglican Church for the formal service and the Sacrament of Communion weekly.

There was more. The Societies began to be too big to remain personal, so Wesley added another layer of organization- Class Meetings. These class meetings were in addition and were more informal. The class leader would begin with the question, “How is it with your soul?” and members of the class were to speak about that had been their temptations, confess their faults, share their concerns, testify to the working of God in their lives, and pray for each other.

John created a set of standards for these classes – the criteria by which to order and evaluate the state of one’s soul. These became known as the “General Rules”. The genius of these is that they are simple – that is that they are simple to remember. They are:

Do No Harm

Do Good

Attend to the practices that lead to Spiritual Growth

These are what most recently set me off on this desire to remember the beauty of our unique tradition. I was given a small book last month: *Three Simple Rules: a Wesleyan Way of Living* by Bishop Reuben Job to read in preparation for General Conference and I was so moved by it that I have ordered it for reading for our All Church Retreat in May. These three simple rules: Do No Harm, Do Good, and Attend to the practices that lead to Spiritual Growth or as Reuben Job has phrased it, “Stay in love with God”, are easy to remember and easy to talk about with the youngest to the oldest. However, the more we really examine our lives and attempt to order our lives around these three simple phrases, we come to the realization that they are not so easy to live. But the more we practice, the more they become our life’s criteria, the more profoundly we grow. They are the tools that can transform our world.

Think about it: Do no harm! Just for example, pay attention to the way you speak to or about others – are the words we speak in conflict aimed at resolving the conflict so all of us feel like winners or are they weapons for winning; do our conversations about others come out of our compassion for them or to they become “gossip”. And then, when we take it to a more global level, is our language about “other nations or cultures” aimed at finding a path to peace or making sure that they are seen as “wrong” or “inferior” or “evil”.

Do Good: It may be random acts of kindness, or a special effort to bolster the esteem of someone beaten down; it’s extending ourselves beyond our own self-interests. It is being proactive. A great Wesleyan proverb: Do all the good you can in all the places you can by all the means you can.

Stay in love with God! Think about it – what does it take to stay in love? It takes time and attention to building the relationship – communicating frequently – delighting in one another and expressing it in praise – in

recognizing the deep need for one another – confessing one’s shortcomings and offering forgiveness when we fail – and celebrating the gift of love. That’s what it takes with God as well. The means we have are this fellowship, regular worship, prayer, scripture, tradition, and experience.

So the beauty of our tradition is it’s intention to be a religion of the heart first and foremost, to organize in such a way that we are truly accountable to each other, and to offer the means to so order our lives in such a way that we grow in love with one another and with God. Those are the inheritances that we have been given. Today, the denomination of eight million worldwide, is more complex than that – and I’ll be sharing some dreams next week about how I see this worldwide church and our place in it. But for today, may you go with these simple rules in your heart: Do No Harm, Do Good you can in all the places you can by all the means you can, and Stay in love with God.