

SERMON – 11/18/07

Christianity's Family Tree – Methodism

Nine weeks ago we began a journey together to look at our sister denominations and try to learn a bit more about what other Christians believe and why...

- We began with the Orthodox & Roman Catholic churches...

Then followed the Lutherans, Presbyterians & Anglicans through the Protestant Reformation...

We spent time with the Baptists & Pentecostals...

And today we finish that journey with the denomination that we are a part of right now – United Methodism...

Again, I'm grateful to Pastor Adam Hamilton and his series by this same title.

- You may remember when we spoke about Anglicanism, that 17th Century England was trying to forge a pathway between Catholicism & the burgeoning Protestant Reformation...

The Church of England was born out of that tension...

And that was the church that the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, grew up in.

But it needs to be said that Wesley never intended to start a new denomination...

he never intended to break away from the Church of England...

Instead, he wanted to find a way to reform the church from within... to bring life, vitality, passion & holiness back!

- John Wesley, born June 17, 1703... was the 15th of 19 children of Samuel & Susannah Wesley (9 of whom died in infancy).

Wesley's grandfathers had been "Dissenters" (aka "Nonconformists")... terms used to describe those who were dissatisfied with the official state church & who formed their own churches).

John's father, Samuel, became a priest in the established church – the Church of England!

John and his younger brother Charles ultimately followed their father into the ministry... and also became Anglican priests.

- Early on in his ministry, John felt a desire for God and for a more rigorous faith than he saw among many of his peers.

In 1725, he wrote that his desire was no longer to be a “nominal” Christian, but to be a “real” Christian.

When Charles was going through college, John began to meet with him & a group of like-minded classmates, who also desired a more rigorous faith.

This group worshipped together & reached out to the needy in the community.

Their methodical approach to the pursuit of holiness earned them the name “Methodist” among their critics.

The name stuck.

- In the early years, John’s own faith leaned more toward the intellect, though he had a deep yearning to experience an assurance of salvation.

At the age of 35, after a failed mission to America, Wesley became increasingly aware of his own lack of faith.

Then, in 1738, Wesley had what he considered to be a profound conversion experience...

As he listened to the words of Martin Luther being read (words reflecting upon the teaching of justification by faith), he reported... “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin & death.”

To this day, United Methodists see themselves as people who bring together both a reasonable faith that is intellectually satisfying... and a passionate & emotionally compelling faith that touches the heart.

- When Wesley’s friend, George Whitfield asked him to come and preach in the open fields (a practice that Wesley initially viewed as improper & distasteful), he declined.

In April of 1739, however, John finally relented & agreed to preach outdoors.

He was shocked at how the people responded to him. They loved it!

From that point onward, Wesley proclaimed that “the world is my parish,” and he would preach wherever people would listen.

It is said that he rode over 250,000 miles by horseback moving across the British Isles... preaching & calling people to follow Jesus Christ.

I mentioned before that Wesley never intended to start a new church... he wanted the Methodists to be a renewal movement within the Church of England.

- Wesley organized people who responded to his preaching into “Societies”... groups that would meet during the week to encourage one another in their faith.

Anyone was welcome to join... and Methodist societies had “3 General Rules” that all had to adhere to:

1. Avoid doing what you know is wrong.
2. Do all the good you can to everyone you can.
3. Pursue the spiritual disciplines (prayer, worship, Bible reading, fasting, etc.).

In fact, all of us United Methodist clergy are charged, at our ordinations, to still uphold these 3 general rules!

- As Methodism grew & developed in England (and later, as it spread across the frontiers of America), there were some distinguishing characteristics that the Methodists became known for.

First was **passionate & relevant preaching!**

From John Wesley on down to the many other lay & ordained preachers, Methodists have become known for preaching that changes lives.

Second, Wesley knew it wasn't enough to hear & respond to the gospel proclaimed... but people had to connect with one another in **small groups!**

18th Century Methodists banded together to encourage & support one another in their faith... and that practice extended to the church in America as well!

We are, at our core, a people who recognize the value of Christian community.

Third, Methodists **love to sing!**

John's brother, Charles, was a prolific hymn-writer... and penned such classics as "O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing"... "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"... and the song we'll sing in a few minutes, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."

It's even said that the early Methodists took popular drinking songs from the local taverns and added new lyrics so people could sing their faith!

Finally, Methodists have been known as **social reformers...**

Wesley believed Jesus called the church to help transform society... so he helped start orphanages, soup kitchens, hospitals & schools... he spoke out against slavery... called for prison reform... and included women in positions of leadership!

- If you remember our discussion on the Anglican church, they spoke about a "three-legged stool" by which they approach decisions of faith: scripture, tradition & reason.

John Wesley felt there was something more... and he added experience!

Methodists refer to this as Wesley's "Quadrilateral"... we start with **Scripture** as the first place of reference for our faith.

We also look at the **Tradition** of the Church... what other Christians over the centuries have found to be normative...

We also engage **Reason**, and our God-given intellect to help us think through situations...

But we cannot neglect **Experience**... and the ways we (and others) have come to encounter truth & life.

- The United Methodist Church is not a creedal church... that means you don't need to profess to believe a specific number of things in order to belong.

Wesley said, "In the essentials we must have unity." The "essentials" for Methodists are: God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit & Scripture...

"In the non-essentials," Wesley remarked, "we need to have liberty." There's freedom for differing beliefs outside of the essentials.

"But in all things," he concluded, "we must have charity" or love.

- United Methodist Bishop Scott James refers to Methodism as the "Extreme Center."
Let's listen to how he describes the place we've stood over time...

The “extreme center” means that the United Methodist Church, when at its best, is conservative in some areas and liberal in other areas. We don’t fit a stereotype very well. For example, some denominations emphasize evangelism. They know how to help non-religious & nominally religious people enter into the Christian life. Well, that’s partial gospel... and it’s part of what we believe as United Methodists. At the same time, some denominations emphasize holiness or sanctification. They’re interested in social justice. They want to get people helping the poor, engaged in the current social issues, etc. But they’re not very good at helping non-religious & nominally religious people enter into the Christian life. Well, that’s only part of the gospel. By the “extreme center,” I mean holding on to a position theologically that embraces both of these extreme positions... and we see how each side needs the other.

I know I’ve only begun to scratch the surface about our United Methodist heritage... there’s so much more that can be said...

- (If you’d still like to learn more, I would encourage you to participate in the next “UMC102” class, which spends 4 evenings looking more closely at Methodism... the next time we offer it will probably be in late January/early February!)
- As we get ready to close this series... I’d like to give you a chance to hear directly from Pastor Adam Hamilton...

Each week we’ve looked at the history of Christianity... from the perspectives of the various denominations we were examining.

Here Dr. Hamilton will not only show us how Methodists view history... but give us a wonderful summary of how it all fits together.

Let’s watch...

Some of you ask me, ‘Where’s my denomination? You didn’t even talk about my denomination.’ Well, all of the Christian denominations in the world spring from one of these eight (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal & Methodist). Is it possible that the body of Christ isn’t a bunch of competing truth claims, but is really a tree? Maybe God sees it this way, too? When we begin to see the body of Christ as a tree, how silly would it be to cut off all the branches except one... and that one branch say, “I am the whole tree!”? Every one of the branches shares the same trunk & root system.

Our roots are in Judaism. Our trunk is Jesus Christ. The sap that feeds the leaves is the Holy Spirit, which permeates the body of Christ. And when you can come to look at it this way, you come to understand how grateful you are for the Body of Christ.

- I hope that God has used this series to not only make you better informed, but also to inspire you to a greater depth of Christian faith.

We have a tremendous heritage, my brothers and sisters...

Hundreds upon thousands upon millions of Christians have gone before us... blazing the way for where the Church is today.

Christianity is not a perfect religion... not by a long shot.

In fact, there are quite a few things that the Church needs to repent from...

But there are also quite a few things we can learn from one another.

We should not be in the business of competing or comparing ourselves with other Christians...

We need to be about the business of following Jesus with all of our heart, soul, strength & mind.

May it be so... by the Grace of God. AMEN.