

A Homily  
“Celebrate Methodism”  
First United Methodist Church Tupelo  
June 14, 2009  
By Danny McKenzie

Good Morning.

In the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the names of John Wesley, Charles Wesley, Thomas Coke, Francis Asbury, and Tobias Gibson, I welcome you to the First United Methodist Church of Tupelo.

A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned at choir practice that the title of my homily for today would be “What’s wrong with being a Methodist?” Dr. Marion Winkler immediately wanted to know if I was making a statement or asking a question. So after considering his comment, I decided to change the title.

If it were a statement, it would be more than a bit presumptuous of ME to try and judge “what’s wrong with being a Methodist” ... and if it were a question “What’s wrong with being a Methodist?” one very obvious might be that our preachers sometimes call on lay speakers to fill the pulpits.

When Andy Ray asked me to fill in today, I thought he must be planning another of his infamous Holy Humor Sundays ... but he assured me he wasn’t – that he wanted a certified lay speaker to speak today. Yes, that’s right: I’m officially board certified as a United Methodist lay speaker. I guess that means there are papers on me somewhere at conference headquarters in Jackson.

So here we are: a former newspaperman who grew up in the Presbyterian church and now works at a Baptist college speaking to a Methodist congregation. What hath God wrought? indeed.

Anyway, I decided to change the title of this homily to a much simpler “Celebrate Methodism.” And though it would be more theological to have three reasons, I settled on two:

1. Today is final day of Mississippi United Methodist Church Annual Conference in Jackson – which explains where all our preachers and Beverly are, and
2. Because Methodism is worth celebrating.

***SLOW DOWN*** ... I believe – believe deeply – that there is a reason we are members of the First United Methodist Church, and that it is – or it should be – much more than our facilities, or our preachers or choirs, or the number of programs we offer.

While those might be reasons for initially becoming a part of this congregation, that’s not all there is to it. It can’t be, because we can walk out our doors right now and within two minutes be in one of four churches with wonderful facilities, great preachers and choirs, and numerous programs.

No, we belong to the United Methodist faith because we believe what has been passed on to us throughout the centuries – starting with our founders John and Charles Wesley; and then with the first two bishops to America, Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury; and then with Tobias Gibson, who brought Methodism to Mississippi in 1799.

Now, there are those who say it makes no difference what denomination we are – that we're all after the same thing. But try telling that to a female who in her soul feels God calling her to preach the Gospel, but is turned away from the pulpit because of denominational doctrine.

A few years ago I was asked to speak to the First United Methodist Church in Edwards, not too far from Vicksburg. When I got there, I was told I would also give a “children’s sermon” to a group of 8 to 10 youngsters who would come sit on the steps of the chancel area.

That caught me off guard, and the only thing I could think of was to talk to them about how the Methodist church values its children. When I mentioned that in some faiths children weren't allowed to receive Holy Communion, you should have seen those little heads all of a sudden look up and those little eyes get really, really wide. Don't tell the children of the Edwards Methodist Church there aren't any denominational differences.

And we won't even bring up baptism – infant or otherwise.

For now, on this day, in this First United Methodist Church of Tupelo – a stronghold of Mississippi Methodism – let us celebrate the Wesleyan Tradition and our Methodist heritage ... let us celebrate who we are.

Are we better than other denominations? Certainly not.

Do Methodists have some inside track into the Holy Kingdom? Probably not.

*Certainly* there are differences among the many Christian faiths and denominations – even though we all proclaim to be followers of the same God, of the same Christ, of the same Holy Spirit.

And they are differences worth exploring ... who knows what we might learn?

In one of my former lives I was a sportswriter, and in 1985 I traveled to South Bend, Indiana, to report on the Ole Miss – Notre Dame football game.

The University of Notre Dame is on an absolutely gorgeous campus and I explored all of it I could during the five days I was there – including my first, and only, Catholic mass ... on the Friday morning before Saturday's game.

Well, I was so moved by the worship service in the beautiful Basilica of the Sacred Heart that when it came time to take part in the Eucharist I fell in line, walked down front and got my wafer, wine and blessing.

I didn't know that in the Catholic church communion is only for Catholics – and then when Notre Dame beat Ole Miss 37-14 the next day, I really felt guilty. Maybe one day Ole Miss will play Southern Methodist University or Millsaps and I can make it up to the football team.

**PAUSE**

On March the Third of this year, Dr. Chuck Kelley, the president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, preached a sermon in which he called Southern Baptists “the new Methodists.” He was not paying us a compliment.

I met Dr. Kelley a couple of years ago when he came to Blue Mountain College, and he is a fine, jovial man ... and in addition to being an effective administrator he is a profound theologian. He did not make that statement lightly, and he was being no more critical of the Methodist faith than he was of the Baptist faith.

In his March Third sermon, Dr. Kelley pointed out that membership in Southern Baptist churches is beginning to decline – and among the many reasons he noted was that much like Methodist churches, Baptist churches were moving toward “universalism” –they were de-emphasizing their identities and trying to be all things to all people instead of staying true to their roots.

Dr. Kelley praised the Methodism of the early days ... for taking the gospel to the American frontier with the call to holy living its focal point. But he said the Methodism of John Wesley and Charles Wesley is no more.

What Baptists know about evangelism, he said, “we learned from the Methodists. ... But their efforts in evangelism and missions have greatly diminished. The passion for holy living has been replaced by behavior blending with the culture.”

Those are strong words, and it's difficult to hear them coming from someone outside our faith. But remember, he was speaking of his denomination ... and truth be told those same words could probably be said of many denominations today.

We have chosen to be Methodists, so let's be who we are.  
We are **NOT** a non-denominational church – in our programs, in this traditional worship service or in our relatively new contemporary worship service, or in anything we do. We are Methodists ... and we need to hear clearly the words of John Wesley:

Methodists are pure in heart. The love of God has purified our hearts from all vengeful passions, envy, malice, and wrath, from every unkind attitude or evil affection. It has cleansed us from pride and arrogance of spirit that lead to contention.

... For all our desires are for God and to the remembrance of God's name. Our one desire is the one design of our life, namely, not to do our own will, but the will of God who sent us. Our one intention at all times and in all things is not to please ourselves but God whom our souls love.

For as we love God, so we keep God's commandments. Not only some, or most of them, but all, from the least to the greatest. ... To do the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven is our daily crown of rejoicing.

Accordingly, we strive with all our might to keep all the commandments of God. For our obedience is in proportion to our love, the source from which it flows. Therefore, loving God with all our heart, we serve God with all our strength.

That's who we are – a people for whom Wesley's "holiness of heart and life" is at the very core of what Methodism is all about.

John Wesley's words describing his own historic enlightenment – his Aldersgate experience – are familiar to nearly all of us, but they are worth hearing time and again:

“ ... I felt my heart strangely warmed,” he said. “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 and death.”

That was what Wesley had been searching for for so many years – as the son of a priest, as a diligent scholar in England’s finest colleges, in a miserable trip to America, and in his preaching in churches and in jails and in taverns and on hillsides all across Great Britain and beyond.

His Aldersgate experience did convince him that the holiness he was looking for “does not begin with human striving, but by trusting the pardoning and empowering grace of God in Christ.”

It was at Aldersgate in London where for the first time Wesley came to understand completely that there’s nothing we can do to earn God’s love – that God gives it to us freely.

Then it's up to us, as the Rev. Bill McAlilly so often preached from this pulpit, to get off our blessed assurances and to share that love with all we meet. And as another Methodist preacher once said, "The only way we can respond to God's love is to respond to those God loves."

Forty-four years ago, our own Jack Reed Sr. stood at this pulpit and raised more than a few eyebrows among those gathered here for the Annual Conference when he said: "I honestly do not see how God can solve problems in human relations without our help."

That's who we Methodists are; that's what we do. We accept the love of God, the challenge to study it and understand it, and the responsibility to spread it.

The title of this talk could easily have been, “The Accidental Church,” because Wesley never intended for his Methodism to become a denomination. He and his brother Charles were the sons of an Anglican priest and they were lifelong Anglican priests themselves.

But by organizing their Societies, their Classes and their Bands – and by sharing that holiness of heart and life with everyone they met, look what Methodism has become.

In his book, “Why I Am a United Methodist,” Bishop Will Willimon writes:

John Wesley could have said to himself, ‘Well, these eighteenth-century English people are poor, not too well educated, biblically illiterate, victims of poverty and addiction. What can anybody do?’”

But Wesley didn't do that. What he did was to create structures to enable ordinary, everyday people like you and me to be people worthy to hear and embody scripture. John Wesley's societies, class meetings, and conferences ... were his creative invention where ordinary, everyday people got to deal with the Bible, not as an intellectual problem but rather as a social, political, personal *challenge to transformation*. Wesley's societies were a political response to the serious call of scripture – making a biblical people out of ordinary folk.

That's it ... right there. That's who we are. We Methodists are ordinary folk and biblical people. It doesn't get any better.

In just a minute, our choir – where I really belong and to where I will eagerly return next week – will sing today's anthem *Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown*.

It is the quintessential Methodist hymn – and it’s for that reason that the words are printed in today’s bulletin. It’s no. 386 in the hymnal ... and all 14 verses of Charles Wesley’s very powerful poem are no. 387.

The words embody what it means to be a Christian. They ask what so many of us in frustration, in depression, in desperation often cry out: “What is this all about? Who exactly is God?”

And in the last five of the 14 verses of the poem, Charles Wesley answers: “thy nature, and thy name is Love.”

’Tis Love! ’tis Love! thou diedst for me.

I hear thy whisper in my heart.

The morning breaks, the shadows flee,

pure Universal Love thou art;

to me, to all, thy mercies move –

thy nature, and thy name is Love.

So let us embrace our United Methodist faith, not run from it or, worse, ignore it. We are the people called Methodists – and that is a good thing. A very good thing.

As we leave here today, let us remember and take to heart some more familiar words of John Wesley:

“Do all the good you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forevermore.  
... Amen.

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