

Sermon Title: Marks of a Methodist: 1. A Methodist Loves God

Primary Text(s): 1 John 4:7-12 (love is from God)

Other Texts: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 or Matthew 22:34-40 (Greatest Commandment: heart, soul, mind);

Romans 5:1-5 (God's love has been "spread abroad in your hearts" KJV)

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Place: Kingston Springs UMC

Season: 6th Sunday after Pentecost

Series: The Distinguishing Marks of a Methodist

Main Point: A Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him."

Read: 1 John 4:7-12

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

A Methodist Loves God

You might be a United Methodist if ... (little book by Rev Robert Martin Walker 1998)

- You think UMW stands for United Methodist Women rather than the United Mine Workers.
- you've never heard a sermon on Hell and you don't feel like you are missing out.
- you accept the fact that "O For 1000 Tongues to Sing" has almost as many verses and tongues.
- you say "trespasses" in the Lord's Prayer instead of "debts" or "sins" ... and you don't know why.
- half the people sitting in your pews lip-sinc the words to the hymns.

I grew up in a Methodist Church. All my life I only heard Methodist preachers. I thought that all Christians thought the same. The name John Wesley was just a given ... we didn't worship him ... or even think about him ... We knew a few of his wise quotations.

Growing up in a Methodist Church didn't make the Baby Boom Generation any different than other youth of that generation. Methodist was a brand name more than it was a way of living in faith.

I would have to say that it was not until after seminary when I was being interviewed for ordination that I realized that there is a lot more expected of the people called "Methodist."

The beginnings came when John Wesley, a young Anglican priest, led a small Christian student club at Oxford England. In 10 years this became a growing number of Christians who wanted to live their lives according to the Gospel and to do so in ways

that held them accountable to each other. By 1742, this collection of people had become an identifiable movement within the larger Christian church. From the very beginning, John Wesley was the spiritual architect and leader of this movement. Anglicans, Quakers, Puritans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and nondenomination Christians were turning to him for spiritual guidance.

As the movement was growing widely, a conference was planned to try to give some definition to the movement. Being the initiator, organizer and acknowledged spokesperson, John Wesley was asked to address the conference. His comments became a pamphlet that gave shape to the movement. – *The Character of a Methodist*>

He began: *“Since the name first came abroad into the world, many have been at a loss to know what a Methodist is; what are the principles and the practice of those who are commonly called by that name; and what the distinguishing marks of this sect, “which is everywhere spoken against.”*

In the coming months and years, I think, our identity as Methodists will again be challenged. We are not thought of as the radical Methodists of 1742. We, at the center of Methodism, really are not sure what that means. If we don’t figure it out, then, I fear, we will be known for all the things Mr. Wesley said we are not.

For the next few weeks, I will focus our worship on five “Marks of a Methodist” as Wesley used them to describe the distinctive characteristics of a Methodist.

Last week’s sermon discussed topics that Wesley spent 4 terse paragraphs on what Methodism is accused of being. Today we begin the positive by **looking at what a Methodist actually is.** Wesley wrote:

“What then is the mark? Who is a Methodist, according to your own account?”
I answer: A Methodist is one who has “the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;” one who “loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength.”

The first Mark, in short: A Methodist Loves God. We Methodists usually do not separate this out from ‘loving our neighbor’ or ‘loving others.’ But that often leaves us short of loving others for the right reasons. Wesley rightly points out that we love because God first loved us.

I have spent considerable time sorting through all the things I thought might make a difference to you in considering this first mark, A Methodist loves God. What could I say that captures Wesley’s sense of importance that caused him to begin here?

I began to focus on what I still did not fully understand. He says in quotation *“the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;”* I did not know what he mean by ‘shed abroad’ in one’s heart. Once again Google quickly rescued me and pointed me toward the King James translation of Romans 5:5. The KJV would have been John Wesley’s Bible throughout his life. Our more contemporary translations read *“God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”*

The old usage ‘shed abroad’ along with the contemporary ‘poured out into’ expand Paul’s original Greek which meant that God’s love was lavishly poured into our very core

[heart] like thick, rich honey that fills our heart to overflowing and lies there as a smooth, shiny sheen.

I want to be a Methodist who knows God's love that way. Love engulfing my life ... heart, soul, and mind ... poured out like honey. Is that what God promised the people of Israel? A land of milk and honey? What an image for God's love.

Now ask yourself, "am I able to accept God's love being poured into my life? Will I allow God's love to be shed abroad in me so that I become a pool of rich honey too? If I am to love God and others, out of what reservoir can I love?"

If we are to be defined by a different sort of love—how do we receive it? Well, **the first step for us is to do just that: receive it!** For much of my life I knew that God loved me. I believed it in my head but didn't feel it in my heart. I discovered that John Wesley went through a similar crisis in his own life. Much of my life and ministry was dedicated to serving God, working for God, sometimes emptying myself for God. I didn't stop to consider that what God really wanted more than just my effort. **God didn't want to use me up ... God wanted to fill me up.** God wanted me to love others as richly as God loves me.

I need the Spirit within me, if I am to love God and others like God loves me. How do we receive the Spirit? **All we need do is ask. We empty ourselves of all but love and invite the Spirit to fill us to overflowing.** We recognize that we can't do it on our own. We need this infusion. It's the first step toward being a true follower of Jesus who loves and serves God and neighbor.

In your hymnal, turn to #384. This is one of the great hymns written by John Wesley's brother, Charles. "Love divine, all loves excelling. Joy of heaven to earth come down. Fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown. Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art; visit us with thy salvation; enter every trembling heart."

Who are Methodists? People who have the love of God—love divine, all loves excelling— shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto them. That's the first mark of a Methodist; indeed, the first mark of a disciple of Jesus. Wesley thought that it's a great place to start.

Sermon closing prayer:

Almighty God, whose love is beyond understanding, whose mercy is beyond comprehension—we lift up our hearts to you in prayer. We pray that you will continue to pour your grace over us and into us. Open us Lord to receive your rich love until it fills us and overflows into every aspect of our lives. Grant to us a determined faith and a fervent love, so that we might be reflections of your divine grace. Hear our prayer, O Lord. Amen.

Dismissal With Blessing

Go forth to love God and your neighbor in all that you do.
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.