

“BACK TO SCHOOL: II - METHODISM 101”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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James 2:14-26

John 3:1-8

I want to begin this morning by telling you a little bit about my family’s background in terms of church. My father was raised in a Roman Catholic family. He went to Catholic schools, he served as an altar boy, and of course, sang in Catholic churches. To the day she died, his mother, my grandmother Anna Bunnell was a staunch and devoted Roman Catholic.

My mother was raised in an Episcopalian family (although her father grew up in the Methodist Church). She and her family faithfully attended St. Johns Episcopal Church in Ithaca, New York.

My parents married, (which, by the way, was in a Lutheran Church, because Dad was directing the choir there at the time) and moved to South Carolina where Dad had gotten a teaching job. As it happened, there was a Methodist Church about a block away from where they were living, so with their first child in his stroller, they walked down the street, went in the door, and so began the Bunnell’s history with Methodism.

We’ve been Methodist ever since. Now, why did I tell you that story? Because I know that our family’s story is not dissimilar to many of your’s. I know from new member classes that many of you were not raised in the Methodist Church - you came into it after a time in other denominations, and some came with no church background.

So that’s why I thought that perhaps we should go, as the sermon series says, “back to school” and learn about our denomination. I think it will be very helpful to all of us, even those of us who have spent our entire lives in the United Methodist Church.

So let’s begin by going back to the early 1700’s. There was a man, an Anglican clergyman, named John Wesley. He was a priest in the Church of England, and also the son of a priest in the Church of England, and the brother of a priest in the Church of England.

John was a bit of a radical. While he loved being a priest, he wasn’t so happy about the state of the Church of England. He, in fact, had some serious

concerns about it. He thought it had gotten a bit stale, and settled in. There was no passion, no desire for growth, no outreach where it was needed the most.

One night, in a prayer meeting, John had an experience that changed his life. It has been termed his “Aldersgate experience” because the meeting was held on Aldersgate Street in London. But what happened, was that in that moment, he fully and finally realized that God loved him, and forgave him, and made him a new creation. Mind you, this was long after he was already ordained that he had this conversion experience.

Well, he was now a changed man, and he sprang into action. He and his brother Charles started little groups called “societies” in which the members got together to study, encourage one another in their Christian journey, and take part in outreach to the poor together. They were very methodical in what they did, very disciplined, and because they were, others who watched them nicknamed them “Methodists” and lo and behold, the name stuck.

While the societies were meeting, John Wesley himself struck out in new territory by taking the Gospel into previously uncharted territory. He would preach in the coal mines, he would go to prisons, he would preach in open fields - and he began to draw crowds - and suffice it to say, the established Church didn't like it. They thought preaching should take place in the church period, and if people wanted to hear it, they needed to come into the church.

If you think about the timing of all these things, by now the mid 1700's, you'll remember that the colonies were forming here in America. So that was the next mission field for John Wesley. He came here to America, not to start a new denomination, but just to witness to the people about faith in Jesus Christ, and to set up some societies. He didn't have great success here, but after returning to England, he sent missionaries here, including some great pastors like Francis Asbury and George Whitfield and others.

They were successful - very successful. And they were successful right here in this part of the world. From New York to Philadelphia to Baltimore and all parts in between, Methodist groups began to meet. We live in what is called “The Cradle of Methodism in America.” From New York to Baltimore, church after church after church was started. Why, even today, if you've travelled anywhere on the Eastern Shore of Maryland or the State of Delaware, you can hardly turn around without seeing a United Methodist Church! Heck, down in Chestertown, there are two right across the street from one another - both still active!

At any rate, Methodism began to take hold in America in the 1780's. The first communion service ever held in a Methodist meeting took place at Barratt's Chapel, right down the road from us in Frederica, DE. At Christmas time in 1784,

an organizing conference took place in the Lovely Lane Church in Baltimore, and the Methodist Church in America was born!

As the country grew, so did Methodism. Preachers called circuit riders traveled the countryside spreading the good news of Jesus Christ! Circuit riders literally rode on their horses from church to church to church - it was called riding a circuit, and they had in their saddlebags three books - the Bible, a hymnal, and the Methodist Book of Discipline - which is the book outlining what we believe, and how we're structured. It was a rough life being a circuit rider - most of them didn't live past their thirties.

As the country grew westward, so did Methodism.

Over the years of our history in America, there have been good times and bad. There have been some splits over things like authority issues, and disagreements over slavery. And there have been some unions - the biggest one being the merger of the Evangelical United Brethren Church with the Methodist Church in 1968, to make it the United Methodist Church that we are today.

But today, we're still going strong. We are the third largest denomination in the United States - Catholics are first, the Southern Baptists are second. We number 12 million members worldwide, and 8 million members here in the United States. The largest growth right now in our denomination is in Africa and the Phillipines where it's growing by leaps and bounds.

So that's how we got to be where we are today. But before I go on, let me go back for a minute and talk about our particular church, and how we got here. In 1740 a classmate of John and Charles Wesley, the previously mentioned George Whitfield, visited Elkton and preached under an oak tree somewhere near where Bow Street is now located. After he left, services began to be held all over Elkton - in homes, by the banks of the Elk Creek, in parks - wherever people would gather to hear the Word. Several of Wesley's missionaries including Francis Asbury stopped by Elkton to experience and help lead these services.

In 1799 the first Methodist society was formed here up on Red Hill. It consisted of 8 members, and a few years later grew to nearly forty, a quarter of whom were African American. In 1813, land was purchased for a permanent building, and the written history says that "a modest meetinghouse was erected on E. High Street." (That is the building that is now used by Providence United Methodist Church.)

In the mid 1850's this present land that we're on today was donated and in September of 1859 ground was broken for this building. It was completed, and then dedicated in September of 1860. You might be interested to know that it cost

\$8,625 which was paid in full by the then 300 members of the church. You might also be interested to know that this beautiful stained glass window behind me wasn't installed until 1902.

Fast forward a few years, to 1924, and the church bought property down the street, near where the Court House is today, for its Sunday School program. Some people here today remember going to Sunday School there, and then walking down here for worship.

In 1949, the wing behind us, with the offices downstairs and classrooms, was built. Back then, the space behind here was a fellowship hall - that's what I remember from my childhood. It had a stage and a kitchen next to it.

In 1957, the church bought the house right next door to here, and it became a Sunday School building. I remember going to Sunday School there as well.

I was interested to read in the church history, that it was in 1962 that a second service was added - up until then there had just been one service.

Well, in 1974, Weldin Hall was built, and has been well used over the years for so many, many things. And, as we all know and celebrate, in 2011, the Wesley Wing, with its six beautiful new classrooms (which are all already filled) became a reality!

So, here we are today, 213 years later, and still going strong. Today, we have nearly 1100 members on the books, and ten more people are coming to a new member's class today!

Now, let me shift gears for a moment to tell you about how the United Methodist Church is organized. We are organized by conferences. Let me explain. The entire denomination makes up the General Conference. Once, every four years, representatives meet in the General Conference to set policy, and to set ministry and mission priorities, and to generally set the course for the denomination.

Under the General Conference, are geographical areas called Annual Conferences. We are a part of the Peninsula-Delaware Annual Conference, which encompasses the Eastern Shore of Maryland the State of Delaware. Annual Conferences are presided over by Bishops. Our's is Peggy Johnson.

Under the Annual Conferences are Districts. We are a part of the Wilmington District, made up of Cecil County MD and New Castle County DE. It is presided over by District Superintendent Derrick Porter, who preached here last September when we dedicated the Wesley Wing.

We are what is called a “connectional” church. We are connected with all other United Methodist Churches, and it is the Bishop who appoints leadership for all of the churches. So the Bishop decides when I come and when I go. This is different from other denominations with what is called a “call system,” where churches hire and fire their clergy. In our denomination, Bishops send pastors to churches, after consulting with them about their needs and desires.

In United Methodism, laypersons and clergy persons work hand in hand. There are several different categories of clergy in our denomination - the two main categories are Elder and Deacon. Elders, which I am, and Brett will be after he serves his probationary period, are the ones who serve in churches as pastors and worship leaders. Deacons, are persons in specialized ministries, that seek to connect the church and the world.

You might be interested to know that in order to be an Elder in the United Methodist Church, you need to have a Bachelors’ Degree, a 90 hour Master of Divinity degree, and serve two years probation before being fully ordained. This church has a wonderful record of sending people into ministry. In just the time that I’ve been here, Patty Frick became ordained an Elder, and Brett is well on his way. Some of you may remember Ron Schatz who served here way back in 2001 or so. I saw him the other day and he’s worked his way through the Course of Study which is a longer path to ordination, and this year, he’s going through the process to be ordained an Elder. And finally, I’m very pleased to let you know that our very own Carlos Reyes has been accepted as a student at Wesley Theological Seminary starting in January!

Let’s turn now to look at what we United Methodists believe. If I had to say in one word what we believe - that word would be “grace.” We believe in the grace of God poured out on us in Jesus Christ, our Savior. We believe that God gave us Christ and salvation through Him, not because we earned it, but because He loves us. And that His gift of salvation is open to all who call upon the name of Jesus and confess Him as their Lord and Savior.

John Wesley taught a lot about grace. He actually talked about the stages of grace - of which there are three. The first is “prevenient grace.” That is the grace of God that goes before - drawing us to Jesus, wooing us, if you will, to ask Jesus into our hearts. Prevenient grace is God stirring up in us a desire to know Jesus. That grace is seen in people, and events, and everyday life when something stirs within us drawing us to the Lord.

When we acknowledge that desire, and turn to Jesus, and ask Him to be the Lord of our life, that is justifying grace. It is called that because that is the point at which we acknowledge that we have sinned and fallen short of who God has called us to be; so we confess and receive His life-giving forgiveness - and begin a

whole new life in Him. We are justified by grace.

The third and final thing Wesley talked about is sanctifying grace. That is the grace of God that goes with us as we live our lives as forgiven, saved, and set free disciples of Christ. It is the grace that stirs us to continue to grow and develop in our journey of faith. It is the grace that stirs us to try to live as Jesus lived. It is the grace that compels us to pray and worship and study and reach out to others.

So you see why grace is a good word to describe who we are as Methodists. We are a people who believe that God loves us even before we know it, who woos us to a relationship with Him, who walks with us to that point where we confess Jesus as the Lord of our lives, and who stays with us always helping us lead holy and faithful lives.

Grace was and is central to Methodism. But so are some other things. I just wanted to mention three briefly. The first is the vital connection between knowledge and piety. Wesley was insistent that Methodists not only pursue holiness in their lives, but also constantly grow in knowledge. Thus the tremendous emphasis in our denomination on Christian Education. You need only look at today's bulletin to see that is still the case - for we have Sunday School, Disciple, short-term classes, off-campus classes, youth group, confirmation, men's groups, women's groups - all sorts of ways for you to grow in knowledge and piety. Wesley firmly believed that the two went hand in hand.

Secondly, Wesley believed and we still believe that faith and good works go together. It was not enough for Wesley that we believed, we also need to put those beliefs into action. And so we do. Again, look around you here, and think of all the opportunities we have to put the Gospel into action - things like the Harvest Food Festival coming up where we'll stock a food pantry for those in need, and the Rotating Winter Shelter, and the Samaritans Purse Christmas boxes, and well, I could go on and on. Faith and works go together in Methodism.

Finally, Wesley was passionate about social justice and outreach. He preached in coal mines with those who were oppressed, he preached in prisons to those who were captive. He stood up against wrong in public, and he took a hit for it. Methodists have, since his day, done the same thing. Over the years, we've stood up against slavery, stood for the rights of women and minorities, and taken a stand for the things for which Jesus stood.

The mission statement of the United Methodist Church today is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Our church's mission statement goes like this - That we will be a place where people come to know Jesus, be known by Jesus, and make Him known to others."

I think that we, as a denomination, and as this church, do that well. We are a church of “open hearts, open minds, and open doors” which is, by the way, our denominational slogan. Sure, we have things to work on, but as John Wesley often put it, “we’re moving on toward perfection.”

So I hope if you’re new to United Methodism, you learned something today, and I hope that even if you’ve been in this church your entire life, you learned something as well.

But more than that, I hope if you came to church today searching for something, or needing something, that you remember that God loves you, His grace poured out in Jesus Christ is for you, and all you have to do is ask to receive it. That is the Good News of the Gospel, and that is the Good News we embrace as the people of the United Methodist Church. Thanks be to God!

Amen.