

September 13, 2009 15th Sunday after Pentecost *We Believe in Love (1)*—
Isaiah 49:1; Jeremiah 1:5 *Amazing Grace Before You Were Born*

What do we believe? Is there a distinctive United Methodist character to our faith? If anybody asks you, “What does this church believe?” what do you tell them? Well, you tell them we believe in love.

As a United Methodist minister I am called upon to answer this question quite a bit. Whenever I prepare to introduce United Methodist faith to persons for the very first time I invite them to share in a little exercise. If you have been a part of my “Inquiry Class” you have already experienced this exercise, but I believe it is an exercise worth revisiting from time to time in your spiritual life.

I want you to imagine just now that you hear a knock at the door. It startles you and me, interrupting this service of worship as it does. There is obviously someone at the door. Imagine that someone knocks again. And finally one of our ushers discreetly goes to the door slowly opens the door and the person enters...and...it is God, God was knocking, wanting to come in. Imagine God looking all around at us gathered here and then stepping in the sanctuary to look for a place to sit. And wouldn't you know it? God sits down right next to you. Imagine what that feels like. God, the Creator of all things, the One Who knows you very well, Who knows everything you have ever done, everything you have ever thought, the One Who made you, sitting right there next to you. How does that feel to you? Take just a moment now in silence and consider God sitting right next to you right now. Live with those feelings for just a moment in silence.....

Now, let me ask you a question. With God sitting right there next to you, what does God really think of you? That's gotta be the first place you go when we consider what we believe. What kind of God do we believe in? Who is this God? What does God really think of you? What do we as United Methodists really believe about God?

Now one thing we believe as United Methodists is whenever we have questions about God there is only one place you can go to get the right answer. The Bible. The Bible begins with these words:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was a formless void...

Genesis 1:1-2a

A bare 27 verses into the Bible, it says

*God created humankind in his image,
In the image of God he created them,
Male and female he created them.*

Genesis 1:27

God places these first two human beings, this first man and this first woman, in a luscious garden, known as the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden had everything they would ever need. God provided everything for them. God told them, *Be fruitful and multiply!* Everything must have tasted so good in God's garden, don't you think?!

Have you ever wondered why God made a world? God never really needs anything. God is the only being ever who is truly self-sufficient—God doesn't need a thing. But there is something about the very essence of God that brings forth the creation of the universe. The Bible revealed this in describing the Creator: "God is love." (1 John 4:16) Love needs relationship.

Out of nothingness, then, love made a world. God planted love in the very heart of the universe—love was the seed placed in the midst of that “formless void.” Love is the very essence of creation. In the beginning God gave to humanity a great gift. And God planted love right here in the human heart. Love is what made you. Love is at the very heart of your existence. Love is the very essence of who you are. That love of God, that’s the image of God in which you were made—the image of God that is still in your heart. That gift of the image of God in us shows us the way, guides our choices in life, and never fails to discern for us the way that leads to life. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah knew this truth when they heard God say,

The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother’s womb he made mention of my name;

Isaiah 49:1

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you

Jeremiah 1:5

God gave you long before you were born a gift of love, a taste for love—when you came into the world you knew already knew the taste of love—the taste of love has always been familiar to you. You are made in such a way that you always hunger after the taste of the love of God and you will never be satisfied until love is restored to the very center of your life.

That gift in us is similar to the gift of instinct nature has given to animals. How is it that birds know to fly south for the winter and back north in the spring? It is that innate gift of life that nature gives them. How do animals know exactly what to eat and what’s not good for them. It is of their very nature. On December 26, 2004, almost five

years ago now, do you remember that great tidal wave that came crashing into South Asia so effecting the character and destiny of so many people? It was that great tsunami that resulted from an earthquake far out and beneath the ocean. Did you notice as the damage was assessed then how very few animals suffered the consequences of that disaster? Scientists suggest that animals, by their very nature, innately sensed something was about to happen and made for high ground. The animals sensed the evidence, felt the signs. They properly discerned the way to life. In a similar manner, God gave to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden the innate gift of life. You and I were made to tell the difference between the things of life and the things of death by the very image of God in which we were created. From the very beginning we were given the taste of love, and we never forget it.

In the garden, though, in the garden we acquired other tastes—the taste of that forbidden fruit on the tree God told us not to eat from. It's an acquired taste, one that takes getting used to, a taste you don't like at first because you weren't born with the familiarity of its flavor in very fiber of your soul. You know what I'm talking about. When God tells you "don't go there" and you go anyway, it leaves a bad taste in your mouth. And I don't think I need to illustrate that very graphically for any of us this morning. You already know what that's like, to go where God has told you not to.

But it wasn't long, was it, before we got very used to it? We even began to prefer the tastes we acquired. We denied love. We didn't trust God anymore but trusted in ourselves. We didn't believe in love any more and tried to build a life on our own resources, our own abilities, our

own creation. We were afraid. We gave up on love and chose to cling to fear. By that choice the image of God in which we are created is no longer firmly established at the very center of our lives but pushed aside, off-center, ignored, rejected, and denied. It's like we lost the gift. We have spent our lives ever since acquiring all kinds of tastes for all kinds of other things when all along it is only the taste of love that truly satisfies. Of course our life has never gone well for us ever since, that's why theologians call it "the fall."

After all this, who, then, is this God? What does God really think of you? What does the Bible say about all this?

Brothers and sister, I have very good news for you today. I am so anxious to tell you this morning that God does not say this in here (the Bible): "OK, children, if you're going to act that way, I've had it with you." No, not in here. In here God says "My child, I know you better than you know yourself. I love you—I have always loved you. Nothing you ever do or say will ever change that." Story after story after story in the Scripture we find God responding to human disobedience with patient, redeeming love. Time after time after time God even uses the very circumstances of human disobedience to fulfill the promise our disobedience intended to deny. At every difficult moment of human history when one might understand if God would simply give up on the whole thing, instead God reached out in love and deliverance. Why else would God come down to earth and become a human being in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God? Why else would the Son of God suffer and die and rise again? The life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a sure sign that God never gives

up on us. God knows you too well. God knows what you need. God will not stop until you have it again.

What does God really think of you? A man by the name of John Wesley struggled with that question in his own life. John Wesley, a priest of the Anglican Church (the Church of England), over 250 years ago founded the movement that became what we now know as the United Methodist Church. In his study of the Scripture and in his own relationship with God he discovered a very distinctive and unique answer to this question. That's where he discovered grace—the amazing grace of God. John Wesley discovered that you and I were made for the taste of love. He called this *prevenient grace*—grace that “comes before.”

About 13 ½ years ago my mother died. Not a year goes by that I don't miss her cooking. Stuffed green peppers, meatloaf, baked pork chops, homemade apple pie, cookies at Christmas.....oh, how I miss her cooking! It's not that we don't have her recipes. As a matter of fact I remember calling Ma more than once long distance just to figure out how to prepare a certain meal I remembered she knew how to do so well. I still have those 3X5 cards with her exact recipe as she dictated it to me over the telephone. Now it is a little difficult to measure exactly “a pinch of this and a dash of that and a palm full of something else,” but I've got it all written down. Before my father's death last January, Dad lived with us for about 5 years. When he was at his best, about once a week it was his turn to cook in our house. When he didn't choose to take us to a restaurant he would prepare something from time to time just the way Ma used to make it. I have been known to take her recipes myself and follow them exactly. But you know what? When Dad fixes it or when I fix it, it just doesn't taste the

same. And I know what it should taste like because I was almost born with it! I guess I remember it so well because it really was my first taste of love.

Love, the image of God in which you were created—it's natural to you. It is native to your very being. It is not an acquired taste like all the other things we chase after so desperately in life.

Whatever other tastes we acquire we never forget the taste of love. It is a grace given to you long before you were born. It is a part of your very nature. John Wesley called this "Prevenient Grace"—grace that "comes before—" the image of God, the love of God in you put there by God long before you were born. It is that longing, that yearning in you for relationship with God. It is the persistent calling of the image of God in you to center your life again upon God alone. That's what John Wesley discovered in his search of the Scriptures and his experience of God in his own life. That's what we believe. God loved you long before you were born. That is the distinctive United Methodist character to our faith.

What do we believe? If anybody asks you, "What does this church believe?" what do you tell them? You tell them: "We believe in love!"

William G. Davidson