

September 20, 2009 16th Sunday after Pentecost (2) *WE BELIEVE IN
Romans 3:23, 5:1 LOVE THAT MAKES IT ALL RIGHT*

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

There is something about you that will never change. And that is this: love made you; love is of the very essence of who you are, love is the very heart, the very core of your being. Long before you were born God put in your heart great treasure, this image of God in which you were created, love placed at the very center of your life. That great treasure is still there. The only problem is it no longer resides at the very center of your being. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.* (Romans 3:23) That image of God in you you have pushed aside and replaced with other things. You and I, just like our ancestors Adam and Eve, have chosen to follow our own way, have lived our lives quite independently from God. We squandered such great treasure, traded it for so many other worthless things. Our priorities are all in the wrong places. You will never be whole, you will never know joy, life will never be right for you until love is restored to the very center of your heart.

If you ever wonder what makes our United Methodist understanding of faith unique and distinctive, it is this notion of the image of God as a very part of our nature as human being. This gift of love is the direct result of the action of the grace of God in our lives long before we are born. Way back in the 1700’s, John Wesley, the priest of the Church of England who began the Methodist

movement, developed a unique understanding of the grace of God. This grace of God that gifts us with the innate ability to recognize love, this natural inclination in us for relationship with God, is the gift, John Wesley said, of God's *prevenient grace*—grace that “comes before.” That was the subject of last Sunday's sermon that began this series, *We Believe in Love Before You Were Born*.

Once you give up such great treasure, can you ever have it back again? Yes, you can. That's the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What you lost can be returned to you. The great treasure you surrendered is given back to you as a gift. That is why the Apostle Paul is so confident in his declaration *since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*. (Romans 5:1) What you need to do is to give your life to him, give to him everything that has taken the place of love in the center of your being, and he will restore great treasure to your heart. All you have to do is say “Yes” to God.

That's why John Wesley preached to the miners, laborers, shopkeepers, and common everyday folk outside the church. That was the message of the Methodist Movement he started over 250 years ago. That's the message of our United Methodist Church today.

You see, John Wesley taught us that when you say “Yes” to God something happens to you. When you say “Yes” to God, your relationship to God is restored. God accepts you just like you are. That's what happens to you when you tell God, “I'm sorry for trying to center my life on so many other things. I now want to center my life on you;” when you give up any and every claim of earning or deserving

this relationship with God and just accept it as a gift just as God accepts you.

John Wesley called this God's *justifying grace*. Justifying grace is the grace of God that is yours the moment you accept the relationship God offers. This acceptance is commonly called our conversion. Our acceptance is an act of faith, not a work through which we merit the relationship. It is the faith that Jesus asks of his followers—an act of trust and self-abandonment by which you no longer rely on your own strength but commit yourself to the power and guiding work of him in whom you believe.

When was the 1st time you said “Yes” to God? Was it a dramatic, emotional, and memorable experience for you? Or was it more a gradual realization in your life that you are indeed a child of God? I expect conversion experiences represented here today are as different and unique as each of you. There is no one way to come to God, that experience is unique to each person and just as valid no matter what its form. My own experience came to me one day as a young teenager. God had been working on me for quite awhile by then. God blessed me with a Mother who never looked out for her own needs first, but always looked out for the need of another. She held a deep concern for the less fortunate, a deep passion for equity and justice, and had little patience for racial prejudice. Having been raised and nurtured in the Methodist Church, one day it hit me, “Hey, God loves me and I really do love God.” So I had a brief but meaningful conversation that day when I told God, “I’m yours.” It was not an earth-shattering, radically life-altering experience for me. It was simply the affirming acknowledgement of something that had been growing in

me all my life. It was not until some time later that I began to realize what was really growing in me was a call to ordained ministry.

When was the 1st time you said “Yes” to God? What was that experience like for you? Whatever your experience—sudden or slowing growing, dramatic or gradual—it was just right for you. It was your own personal experience of love.

That was the moment in your life when God makes it all right. You made mistakes, you made bad choices, you went other ways, but right then you promised God you would go where your Lord would lead you. You apologized to God and God accepted your apology and accepted you. There is really nothing you can ever do to make up for the past but that’s OK because God makes it all right. Just as a parent comforts a child who comes running saying, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!!” so God held you close and said, “It’s OK, it’s OK, it’s all right, it’s all right.” God, you see, makes it all right. Love makes it all right. That’s God’s justifying grace. What a great treasure.

The cheerful little girl with bouncy golden curls was almost five. Waiting with her mother at the checkout stand, she saw them, a circle of glistening white pearls in a pink foil box. "Oh please, Mommy. Can I have them? Please, Mommy, please?" Quickly the mother checked the back of the little foil box and then looked back into the pleading blue eyes of her little girl's upturned face. "A dollar ninety-five. That's almost \$2.00. If you really want them, I'll think of some extra chores for you and in no time you can save enough money to buy them for yourself. Your birthday is only a week away and you might get another crisp dollar bill from Grandma."

As soon as Jenny got home, she emptied her penny bank and counted out 17 pennies. After dinner, she did more than her share of chores and she went to the neighbor and asked Mrs. McJames if she could pick dandelions for ten cents. Grandma did give her another new dollar bill for her birthday and at last she had enough money to buy the necklace.

Jenny loved her pearls. They made her feel dressed up and grown up. She wore them everywhere, Sunday school, kindergarten, even to bed. The only time she took them off was when she went swimming or had a bubble bath. Mother said if they got wet, they might turn her neck green.

Jenny had a very loving daddy and every night when she was ready for bed, he would stop whatever he was doing and come upstairs to read her a story. One night as he finished the story, he asked Jenny, "Do you love me?" "Oh yes, daddy. You know that I love you." "Then give me your pearls." "Oh, daddy, not my pearls. But you can have Princess, the white horse from my collection, the one with the pink tail. Remember daddy? The one you gave me. She's my very favorite." "That's okay, Honey, daddy loves you. Good night." And he brushed her cheek with a kiss. About a week later, after the story time, Jenny's daddy asked again, "Do you love me?" "Daddy, you know I love you." "Then give me your pearls." "Oh Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have my baby doll. The brand new one I got for my birthday. She is beautiful and you can have the yellow blanket that matches her sleeper." "That's okay. Sleep well. God bless you, little one. Daddy loves you." And as always, he brushed her cheek with a gentle kiss.

A few nights later when her daddy came in, Jenny was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed Indian-style. As he came close, he noticed her chin was trembling and one silent tear rolled down her cheek. "What is it, Jenny? What's the matter?" Jenny didn't say anything but lifted her little hand up to her daddy. And when she opened it, there was her little pearl necklace. With a little quiver, she finally said, "Here, daddy, this is for you."

With tears gathering in his own eyes, Jenny's daddy reached out with one hand to take the dime-store necklace, and with the other hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue velvet case with a strand of genuine pearls and gave them to Jenny. He had them all the time. He was just waiting for her to give up the dime-store stuff so he could give her genuine treasure.

Anonymous from the Internet

Those dime-store pearls, those dime-store pearls, they meant her whole life to her, as best as a little girl almost five years old understands life at all. She loved those pearls. But she loved her Daddy more. And boy, did Daddy ever make it all right! And you know what? I bet her Daddy let her keep those dime-store pearls, too.

The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is this: what you lost can be returned to you. The great treasure you surrendered is given back to you as a gift. That is why the Apostle Paul is so confident in his declaration *since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*. What you need to do is to give your life to him, give to him everything that has taken the place of love in the center of your being, and he will restore great treasure to your heart by God's justifying grace. All you have to do is say "Yes" to God.

Have you said "Yes" to God? Have you turned away from all the other things in life that just leave you empty and now center your life on God? Have you turned over to God everything—your job, your relationships, your family, your worries, your joys—have you? Have you ever told God, *"I'm sorry for trying to center my life on so many other things. I now want to center my life on you."* Have you ever had a brief conversation with God and just said, "I'm

yours!”? There is no better time than right now as you worship God today.

There is really something about you that will never change. You will never be whole, you will never know joy, life will never be right for you until love is restored to the very center of your heart. When you say “Yes” to God, when you accept God’s justifying grace, God makes it all right.

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

William G. Davidson