

September 27, 2009 17th Sunday after Pentecost *We Believe in Love
Romans 14:17, Mark 1:15 that Changes Your Heart
Not Just Your Mind*

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

Love. That’s where we came from. That’s where we started. But whatever happened to us? When God first made us we were so happy. When God placed us in the Garden of Eden in the very beginning everything was provided for us—there was plenty for everybody. We walked closely with God and with one another then. There was no tension, strife, or worry. And there certainly wasn’t any hunger or poverty or war then. We just weren’t made for any of that. We were so happy then. Whatever happened to us? What we experience now in life is not the way we were made. Something has got to change. Can we ever get it back again?

John Wesley, the priest of the Anglican Church (the Church of England) who over 250 years ago began the movement which became what we now know as the United Methodist Church, wondered the same thing in his own life. He knew we weren’t made for this. And he knew only God could bring it back again. We were made in the image of God—the love of God was planted right in the center of our hearts in the very beginning. John Wesley knew what happened to us in the Garden of Eden—it’s the same thing that happens to you and to me every day: you and I center our lives on other things, things that neither fulfill nor satisfy.

We push that love in us aside, we deny it, and we lose our center. We gave up on love and chose to cling to fear.

I learned this in a powerful way one day as I sat in theology class at Duke Divinity School. Dr. Robert Cushman, Professor of Theology at Duke, known for his very deep philosophical understanding of the ways of God, was describing the fall of humanity as John Wesley understood it. Whatever happened to us? Dr. Cushman, one of the most profound theologians of his day, cleared his throat and recited for us a description of what happened to us in the Garden of Eden

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men,
couldn't put Humpty together again.*

Now, how in the world do you piece together a broken life once it is shattered? How in the world can you ever piece back together a broken egg once you drop it? How do you mend a broken heart? That's what's wrong with us, isn't it? Just when we thought we were right on top of the wall in charge of everything without any help from God, we fall down go boom!

Brothers and sisters, we United Methodists, we believe in love! Jesus said, "God is love." So what does love do with a creation that has lost its center? What does love do when it has been displaced? Well, there are some things that love does and there are some things that love does not do. We believe that as United Methodists. I want to share with you what we United Methodists believe love never does.

First of all, we believe love does not threaten, frighten, or scare you back into love. A God of love does not hold over our heads the threat of punishment, evil, or natural disaster to force us back into relationship. That is just one thing that love does not do. You see, this love planted in the human heart in the beginning—it's still there. We may have forgotten it, it may be pushed aside, it may be replaced with something else, it may be off-center, but it's still there. That's what John Wesley discovered. That love, placed there by God, continues to call to you—it is a love you can never forget. If you already follow fear then fear is not going to win you back to love. Only love can do that.

Now this is not to say we don't believe in sin. No, John Wesley looked at the sin of his day straight in the eye. He denounced slavery, exploitation of workers, child labor, economic injustice, unfaithful relationships, and all the rest. We stand firmly in that tradition. He knew though, that it is the heart that needs to change. Only love can change a heart. For this reason we believe God doesn't try to scare us back but, rather, God loves us back to love, for God still believes in love. That's the kind of God we United Methodists believe in. We United Methodists believe that love never threatens, frightens, or scares.

Secondly, we believe that love makes you change your heart not just change your mind. To believe is not just to understand in your mind or assent to a set of intellectually objective truths. Life is not about simply adopting a list of correct "beliefs," a list of correct beliefs or doctrine that

John Wesley called by the name “orthodoxy.” He spoke about this in his sermon called “The Way to the Kingdom:”

Neither does religion consist on orthodoxy or right opinions; which...are not in the heart, but the understanding. (One) may be orthodox in every point; he may not only espouse right opinions, but zealously defend them against all opposers; he may think justly concerning the incarnation of our Lord, concerning the ever blessed Trinity, and every other doctrine contained in the oracles of God. He may assent to all the three Creeds...He may be almost as orthodox as the devil...and may all the while be a great stranger...to the religion of the heart.

United Methodism is not so much about doctrine as it is about faith. It is more a matter of the heart than a matter of the mind.

So, love never threatens, frightens, or scares. Love makes you change your heart not just your mind.

Third, love never gives easy answers to the hard questions of life. It is always the very real temptation for the church to offer the list of 5 beliefs or 7 spiritual laws which, if you simply assent to them, will make life whole, happy, and reasonable. It is always so much easier in the face of the tragic death of a child or young person to say, “God needed him in heaven more than here on earth.” The really hard questions of life always tempt us to find easy answers because the tension and the suffering in the face of these questions are just too great. But love never falls to that temptation. Love knows that life is just not that simple. Love calls you into the midst of the challenges of life

armed with the faith and the heart of one who ultimately believes in love. When you believe in love you know deep in your own heart that no matter what may happen or what may come love will always prevail.

We United Methodists believe that there are things that love simply does not do. Love never threatens, frightens, or scares. Love makes you change your heart not just your mind. Love simply does not give easy answers to the hard questions of life.

If that is what love does not do, never does, what is it that love does? I believe John Wesley gave the church a key to that understanding when he thought carefully about the grace of God and described it in a very unique way. He suggested one way to understand the depth and breadth of the God's grace is to consider three aspects of our relationship with God: God's relationship with us at three distinct moments: before we are born, when God restores our relationship; while God is still working on us. He called the relationship God has with us before we are born as God's *prevenient* grace—grace that comes before; the gift of love, the image of God in us that always calls to us and urges us back into full relationship with God, our innate ability to always know love. He called the moment God restores our relationship, the moment when we say “yes” to God, an act of God's *justifying* grace. The continuing presence of God with us when we are asking the hard questions about life, John Wesley understood that continuing presence and relation with God where we grow more and more in grace each day an act of God's *sanctifying* grace.

Sisters and brothers, God is love. Love made the world. Love made you. Whatever happened to us? We denied love. We went our own way. We chose not to follow God anymore. We fell. We are broken. We suffer from a broken heart. Only love can mend a broken heart.

Whatever happened to us? We used to be so happy. Can we ever get it back again? Yes we can. Because it's always right here, deep in our hearts—that love of God, that image of God in which we were created.

And you want to know the really good news? When you first said “yes” to God, God restored that love to the very center of your life. God gave that back to you. And that love in you, it just can't help comin' out sometimes. Love always prevails. That love in you can do anything. Love can even put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

William G. Davidson