

October 11, 2009 19th Sunday after Pentecost
 Hebrews 4:12-16

*We Believe in Love
 that Never Lets You Go*

Would you like to live longer? Would you like to have the ability to recover most quickly from illness and surgery? Would you prefer speedy recovery from depression? Would you like to be better able to cope with pain? According to an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association persons who live longer, recover more quickly from illness, surgery, and depression and are best able to endure chronic pain are persons with strong religious beliefs and practices. Harold G. Koenig, a professor at Duke University Medical Center, advises physicians to ask patients about their spiritual history and encourages them to support beliefs that “help their patients cope.”

A number of hospitals have modeled their approach to treating the whole person on a program established by a United Methodist Chaplain at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

<http://allnurses.com/nursing-blogs/intensive-prayer-unit-369627.html>

The “Intensive Prayer Unit,” (IPU) almost ten years ago.

IPU is ...a process in which volunteers from.. local... church(es) take time each day to pray for specific patients struggling with cancer...IPU..has over 100 patients signed (at any one time).

United Methodist Reporter, Paul McKay, Aug. 28, 2001

Religious belief and practice. They’re good for the patient. They’re good for the prayer partner. They’re good for everyone. It seems we all could use a good “dose” of God’s grace!

This evidences in a most particular way the emphasis of this series of sermons on our distinctive United Methodist witness. We really do depend so much on that image of God in us; the image of God in your heart that called you back into relationship with God. The image of God in you is that yearning, that longing in you that is never satisfied until your relationship with God is restored. This is

the grace of God John Wesley, the founder of the 18th century movement in England that became our United Methodist Church, identified as Prevenient Grace—the love of God in you before you were born. That image of God was restored in you by God’s justifying grace, as again John Wesley described it.

It’s like your first experience of God’s love—it’s just the beginning. If there is one thing that makes United Methodism distinctive it is this: when you first come to faith in Jesus, that’s just the beginning. Conversion, as we United Methodists understand it, is not just a one-time event in your life. The first time you said “Yes’ to God had better not be the last time! In the moment of your conversion, you know, when God made it all right, God re-established your relationship with God but it was not the end. It was just the beginning. You see, God’s love does not stop after you first come to God. No, if you know God at all you know how rich and generous and abundant God’s grace is to you day after day after day. According to John Wesley this is the work of God’s sanctifying grace. You see, God will never stop until love fully restores your whole life. God will never stop until love is again the way of the world. God will never stop until love restores all of creation. You see, we believe in love that never lets you go.

There are moments, aren’t there, in your life when you receive a new insight, a new inspiration, a new awareness of God’s love for you—an experience, an awareness, a knowledge that you never quite had before? That moment is pure grace—a sure sign that you have been drawn yet a little closer to God than you were before. That’s the real gift that God gives you.

- a warm feeling in your heart during a worship service
- a conviction in your soul that you just cannot identify as anything else but the call of God

--or it might just as easily be a restlessness of spirit that things just aren't right, when you are led in a different, unique direction in your life

That's the gift of the love of God, God's sanctifying grace, when you realize that you are not just saved once, you are saved every day, when you realize that your first repentance was just practice for the daily discipline of prayerfully and deliberately surrendering every bit of you life to God.

John Wesley believed God's love makes a difference in your life.

--old, harmful habits are rooted out by love and replaced with holy habits

--indifference to the plight of others gives way to an overriding passion of self-giving love

--obsession for accumulation and getting and gaining is transformed by a real experience of the sheer joy of giving

You see, we believe in love that never lets you go.

Things happen to you when love grows in you. That's when

--two friends who fell out of friendship with one another become friends again

--a parent and a teenager finally do hear and understand one another in the midst of very honest and maybe heated discussion on a very important issue to them both

--a husband and wife, after talking past each other for a number of years, finally begin to listen, really listen to each other

--you face a very difficult and serious threat to your health and you don't know how in the world you could ever make it through the treatment required but somehow, somehow you do

--you share the last hours with your loved one knowing all along in your heart that death, though it comes, will never have the last word

That's the love we believe in—love that never lets you go.

When you come to faith in Jesus, that's just the beginning. We believe in love that never lets you go. And God will not stop until all the wholeness, goodness, love, and justice God first made in the Garden of Eden restores all of creation. John Wesley believed this so strongly that

- every time he saw an underage child working long hours in an English factory, he took action
- when he heard stories of laborers and miners risking their lives in unsafe working conditions, he protested
- he denounced the practice of slavery and worked for economic justice.

God didn't make the world that way. John Wesley believed the church, the community that professes to live life right now the way God intends it, should pray, work, and witness until every vestige of injustice and oppression is eradicated from the earth. This distinctive social witness is a vital part of United Methodism today. So

- when child labor laws were adopted
- when slavery was abolished
- when the labor movement enhanced safe working conditions and fair labor practices
- when the civil rights movement witnessed to the cause of freedom and justice
- when a wall came down in Berlin

that's the work of the love that never lets us go. And when the abundant resources of the earth are finally so equally available that no child anywhere goes hungry any more, that will surely be the work of love that never lets you go.

How can you tap this resource in your life and realize all the advantages to health, life, and spirit that it promises? John Wesley believed that persons who adopt spiritual practices are those who

find themselves most open to the influence of God’s sanctifying grace in their lives—practices like prayer, Bible study, hearing the Word preached, Holy Communion, generosity with the poor, and service.

Bishop Charlene Kammerer shared the story of a spiritual encounter she had with retired Bishop Richard Looney in the Laundromat of the hotel where they were staying. This was Bishop Kammerer’s very first meeting of the Council of Bishops. As she was preparing to launder a few things she needed, Bishop Looney came in. He said to her, “Here, I’m retired and you have so many other important things to do than this. Let me do that for you.” At first she refused, but since she was just learning how hard it is to say “no” to Bishop Looney she eventually relented and returned to her room. It was not long before there was a knock on her door and the Bishop delivered her clothes neatly folded. As she received them from him and saw the look of satisfaction and peace upon his face she was struck with how important that one act of service was for him. She knew then that if she had refused his offer she would have denied him an important practice so essential to his spirit, inadvertently hindering the work of God’s sanctifying grace in his life.

Bishop Charlene Kammerer, Virginia Conference “Teaching Day,” January 25, 2005, Fishersville, Va.

Life, health, and wholeness. That is the work of God’s sanctifying grace—love restored to the center of your life, the center of our community, the center of our world, the center of creation. Sisters and brothers, God will never stop until love restores your life. God will never stop until love is again the way of the world. God will never stop until love restores all of creation. We believe in love that never, never, never lets you go.

William G. Davidson