

(1 line outline: me, alcohol, & Methodist history; Jesus and the Great Commandment; staying focused today on what matters)

(I apologize in advance. With so much going on this week, not to mention two snow days with children, editing all I want to say has proven difficult; so I may go a bit long.)

I am not a fan of beer or wine. Before you judge me for that, know that I've tried numerous variations of both here in the States and even in Germany, and both wine and beer generally have the same unappealing taste to me. (I get the same unappetizing taste from *kombucha* and *kimchi*, that fermented Asian cabbage; so I assume it has something to do with fermentation.)

That said, I can enjoy a flavored vodka or a rum and coke from time to time. The weird thing is that were I to have admitted such as a Methodist a hundred years ago, I'd probably have been railroaded out of the church!

If you weren't aware of this, Methodists have a history of being understood as teetotalers, particularly as presented in early 19th century America. Methodists were advocates and leaders in both the temperance and prohibition movements in America in the 19th and early 20th Century. These actions were rooted in an understanding of our movement's stance against alcohol.

Except that, truth be told, found of Methodism John Wesley wasn't exactly anti-alcohol. Now, sure, both drunkenness and "spirituous liquors" were discouraged in the movement and its rules from its earliest days; but wine and beer wouldn't have been included in the original definition. The prohibition against alcohol in our movement's history was a response to the gin craze of the early 1700s.

Gin was introduced to England toward the end of the 17th century, and by the 1730s there was a "gin craze" as it was being produced and sold by a great number of small operations throughout the country. Gin was held by politicians and leaders to be responsible for increased crime in the country. A couple famous prints by artist William Hogarth in 1751, *Gin Lane* and *Beer Street*, sought to depict the "evils" of gin and the general benevolence of beer.

The problem was of their own making, in some ways. Encouraging the production of gin helped to raise the cost of grain, whose prices had plummeted in years prior. With the production of so much gin, grain

prices went up and the economy benefitted.

Only, not everyone did. And that is exactly why and where John Wesley became an advocate against gin and other “spirituous liquors.” Wesley wasn’t against gin or distilled liquor because of the evils they created (though he would, of course, critique such evils). No, Wesley was against the economics of the situation: gin distillation resulted in the raised price of grain but also used a great deal of grain, with the unintended consequence that the poor were further impoverished and unable to afford food while an increasingly shrinking number benefited from the creation and sale of gin. ¹

So, in Wesley’s day, beer and wine were acceptable but spirituous liquor was not, and the original reasons for this distinction were rooted in care for the poor. Let me repeat that: whatever became of their origin in transmission over the years, the early Methodist’s admonitions against spirituous liquor were rooted in their concern for the poor.

There’s an important point I want to get at here: Motivations matter.

Ultimately that’s where Methodism starts and ends, with a motivation: Methodists desire to “love God” and “love neighbor.” That is our founding motivation, after the example set by Jesus and shared in Wesley’s day with a society yearning to rediscover it. For Wesley, crusading against gin was a way to love neighbor because of the love of God. By helping to limit the reach and success of gin, Wesley and our Methodist forebears were seeking to lessen the price of grain and free it, again, for food for the poor.

This is the character of a Methodist, then and now – there ain’t nothing particular about a Methodist from any other person who is honestly, earnestly seeking to know and follow God in their own lives and then following that great command Jesus gave us, to love God and love neighbor. As one leader once put it to me, a Methodist is someone who follows Jesus in the company of the Wesley brothers.

In the same century, while he was being critiqued for his enthusiastic religious movement, Wesley took his pen and set about responding to criticisms of Methodism by writing “The Character of a Methodist”

¹ As a side note, Arthur Guinness was a contemporary of Wesley. Guinness was influenced particularly by Wesley’s teaching on stewardship (what we often summarize as “earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can”). As a brewer during a time when beer still had some health benefits over water, because the treatment and safety of water wasn’t a thing but micro-organisms obviously were, Guinness’ faith contributed to his business. There are stories of how his faith led him both to be successful in business and also helpful to others; he sought to do what good he could in his time.

(which you should have in your bulletin). Wesley makes it clear that Methodists are *not defined*...

- Methodists are not defined by opinions of any sort, for like other Christians Methodists find inspiration from the holy Scriptures and the ancient creeds. Wesley sagely then wrote, “but as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think”
- Methodists are not defined by any particular words or phrases; by any unique actions or customs specific only to them, or because they place a stress on any single part of religion.

“Who [then] is a Methodist...?” Wesley asks?

“A Methodist is one who has “the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;” one who “loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength.” God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul...”

Wesley goes on in his treatise to describe a person earnestly seeking to know and love God.

I'll pause there. I started us out this morning by asking, “why are you here?” For the most part, I believe everyone in this room is here because we earnestly desire to know and love God. We gather to worship to express that love, and to experience the presence of the divine in a way that helps encourage and inspire us in our daily living. We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing because in our community we hear God's word and will expressed and join together in solidarity as those who desire to live after the example of Christ but recognize we don't quite always live up to that example. Like others in many other churches around the world, we aim to be followers of Jesus Christ, and gathering together helps us in that pursuit.

That's it. We aim to follow Christ, loving God and neighbor. That's our motivation. Wesley shared that, “I, and all who follow my judgment, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men, by any but the common principles of Christianity...” We share motivation with the earliest Methodists, with the earliest Christians, and with contemporaries around the globe.

Near the end of his treatise Wesley concludes:

“Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thine? I ask no further question. If it be, give me thy hand. For opinions, or terms, let us not destroy the work of God. Dost thou love and serve God? It is enough. I give thee the right hand of fellowship...”

Our motivation is to love and serve God. One way this was expressed was in the mission of early Methodism that we recall to this day, “to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.”

Herein lies a difficulty, because as time passes we tend to get into conflict about what “scriptural holiness” entails. In centuries past, “scriptural holiness” meant slaves should subject themselves peacefully to their masters. In decades past, “scriptural holiness” meant women should not be in positions of leadership and that anyone who went through a divorce could and often would be ostracized. Note that this happened not just in Catholic churches but even in Methodist ones!

Like the Pharisees of the New Testament, there have always been those among us who in their earnest efforts to defend rituals or beliefs they were taught become self-righteous protectors of what they understand to be God’s universal and timeless expectations.

For our earliest movement’s founders, “scriptural holiness” had everything to do with being perfect in love for God and neighbor. Scriptural holiness meant receiving and responding to the love and grace of God shed abroad in our hearts in such a way that we then lived in that love, sharing it as best we can with others.

I might get into this in more detail another time, but Wesley’s articulation of theology – Wesley’s way of helping people to make sense of God and faith in their lives in their time that we inherit as our Methodist heritage – had two central poles:

First, GRACE. Wesley routinely emphasized that our salvation is through our faith but by the grace of God. You’re likely familiar, especially if you have taken part in a Walk to Emmaus weekend, that Wesley particularly articulated three ways by which the Holy Spirit works in our lives for the grace of God: preventing (or prevenient) grace, where God works in every person’s heart regardless of their religious experience or response; justifying grace, where God brings to us a full sense of the pardon, forgiveness, and love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ; and sanctifying grace, by which the Holy Spirit works with us to help perfect us in love.

The second pole of Wesley’s, and by extension Methodist, theology is HOLINESS. In this case, not the holiness of God, though that is integral to our understanding of God, but holiness as our response to the work and experience of God’s grace in our lives. Holiness is our lived desire to be more like Jesus, to

truly follow the great commandment to love God and others.

God is the one at work in both, our experience of Grace and our efforts toward Holiness, and Wesley came to understand this. Later in his life, he made it clear that he expected much of himself in regards to holiness, he sought to do and follow what he heard God speaking to him. At the same time, he extended a great deal of grace to others, allowing for differences. Recognizing in his own way that our spiritual pathways are unique to us, he sought to demonstrate some of the same forgiveness and love to others he knew of God in Jesus.

So, to help people know and love God and others, Wesley published... a lot! He worked to edit down and sometimes simplify the work of other great Christian thinkers so that the people of his day could engage their faith with their head, heart, and hands; so they could reflect on what they believed, experience the love and guidance of God, and make a positive difference in their world.²

Most of us know we are at a pivotal moment in the life of our tribe, our movement, our modern denomination. Delegates from around the world are gathered in St Louis at this very moment, having spent yesterday in prayer together, today they begin political processes and machinations focused around conflicting agendas. Whatever motivations may have set us on the path, we seem to hear much now about whether we will extend grace *or* expect holiness of one another.

Which, finally, brings me to Jesus.

A legal expert “tests” Jesus, asking what he must do to gain eternal life. What sets him right with God? Jesus turns the table and asks him, because Jesus recognizes the expert already knows, as evidenced in the expert’s answer: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus commends him, “do this, and you will live.”

Now, there are two ways to read what transpires next. Luke tells us that “the legal expert, wanting to justify himself, asked Jesus, “and who is my neighbor.” I go into an alternative perspective in our

² I chose the Message and CEB for our readings this morning in alignment with Wesley’s efforts, because Wesley believed in and demonstrated taking the Scripture to people in ways that engaged them. Wesley did all he could to help others experience for themselves that they might hear God speaking directly to them, calling them to whatever vocation or life changes God had in mind for them; not the vocation or life changes Wesley thought they should go through...

Mountain Pathways guidebook that extends grace to this encounter; but the traditional interpretation of the text is that the legal expert wants Jesus to confirm that the expert's current actions and beliefs, his confidence that he is doing enough by following Jewish customs, fulfills the commandment. And Jesus, *again*, turns the table on him with the story of the Good Samaritan, whom even the legal expert can realize acted as a neighbor to the man in distress. "Go and do likewise," he leaves the expert with.

Implicit in the interaction is condemnation of the way the Pharisees and legal experts so regularly held themselves as the epitome of fulfilling God's will. They knew the scriptures and they lived them out far better than the tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners. These religious types were much closer to God than the ne'er-do-wells Jesus hung out with.

Except, of course, that God incarnate, the Messiah the religious folk claimed to wait for, spent his time hanging out with exactly such a motley crew, telling them stories about prodigal sons, good Samaritans, vineyard owners, and more.

Later, some of these who knew Jesus best, disconsolate about his death, went back to what they knew best: fishing. And when they were told where and how to catch a miraculous catch, they didn't dare ask the man on the beach who he was. They knew he was the Lord. They recognized his voice, speaking to them. They felt the implication of the encounter, a remembrance that they had not too long before been re-appointed to fish for people, rather than fish, but in their fear and uncertainty had retreated to what was comfortable.

"Do you love me?" Jesus asks, and Peter and the disciples must have heard the implications of the great commandment; that they were to love God, whom they knew through Jesus, and their neighbor.

"Do you love me" Jesus asks, and he reminds the disciples they have a responsibility to live after his example; not to retreat together with others like them, but to go out and be found guilty of hanging out with others of God's children that the self-righteous and well-to-do wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole.

"Do you love me," Jesus asks, and his words burn a hole into Peter's heart, because of course Peter loves Jesus, despite the fact that he denied knowing him. Despite the fact that he had failed to fully follow in Jesus' footsteps.

Friends, I love Jesus, but were he to sit me down by a campfire and ask me the questions he asks of Peter, I know I'd feel my heart burning within me.

Do you love me?

You know I love you, Jesus, but if I am honest, sometimes my kids and family seem to take up a larger part of my heart than you or my neighbor.

Do you love me?

You know I love you, Jesus, but sometimes its easier to hang out with others who act and look and think like I do rather than really extending the love I know from you to others whose experience of you might be different.

Do you love me?

You know I love you, Jesus, but sometimes I hold too dear certain beliefs and interpretations I have learned and I cannot fathom that you might be speaking a new and different word.

I would love you, Jesus; with all my heart, and soul, and strength, and mind. And because I love you, I would love my neighbor as myself. And I ask your grace to strengthen me to live in that love more fully, that like those who came before me your great commandment might be the primary motivation in my life, and in how I treat all others, this day and forward.

Do you love me?