

Why I Am a United Methodist – Part 1
John 3:1-16
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St. John United Methodist Church
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Today marks the beginning of a two-part series answering the question, “Why I Am a United Methodist.” In order to answer this question we need to understand something of the life and ministry of John Wesley. Wesley was one of 17 children born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley in England. One night when John was 6 the parsonage where they lived caught fire. Actually, it is not known how the fire started. Samuel and Susanna herded the kids outside. They thought they had them all. Suddenly, little John appeared at the second story window. Smoke poured from the window. No one seemed to know what to do. Samuel knelt down to pray to God to receive the soul of his son. But neighbors decided to put their prayers into action. They formed a human ladder up to the window and pulled little John to safety. Susanna told John “he was a brand plucked from the fire.” For the rest of his life John felt that he was saved for a special purpose.

Fast forward to studies at Oxford. John and his brother, Charles, led a small group of students who wanted to put their faith into action. So they met regularly and made lists of their offerings and their visits to the poor. They held each other accountable for their faith. Other students teased them and called them a new name...Methodists. And the name stuck.

And now a story of failure. John and Charles became Anglican priests and sailed to America to be missionaries to the colonists and natives. They were going to save the heathen Indians, but discovered an independent attitude in Georgia that did not mix well with the Wesley's rules about Christianity. After a failed romance John found himself on a boat back to England. Then came the big storm that tossed the ship like a cork. John was terrified...terrified that he would die and not be with God forever. He noticed a group of Moravian Christians on board who were not afraid. In fact they were singing songs of praise to God! He noticed that they had an inner peace he did not have. The storm subsided and they made it safely to England.

On the night of May 24, 1738, Wesley attended a meeting where someone was reading Martin Luther's commentary on the book of Romans. It was during the reading of the preface when Wesley felt something. It was an emotion that ran deep through his soul. At that point he knew that he knew that he belonged to God.

One of the reasons I am a United Methodist is because **religion is of the heart**. This Anglican priest, who knew all about Jesus, came to know Jesus in a very personal, heartfelt way. After his Aldersgate experience he wrote in his journal, “About a quarter before nine while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation.”

In the third chapter of John, a man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night and asks what he needs TO DO to get in on what Jesus is selling. Jesus replies, “Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Old Nicodemus is befuddled. All his life he has earned and achieved everything he ever wanted. What must he DO to get this new birth? How is it possible for an old man like me to be born a second time? Can I enter the womb of my mother and try to get born one more time?

Jesus replies, “The wind (Spirit of God) blows where it wills.” Nicodemus is like the young John Wesley. He thinks that religion is primarily something he DOES, something he

must work hard to believe, or some good deed he must try hard to perform. But the kind of birth Jesus describes is not something we believe or do. It's an act of God, a gift of God. It is GRACE. So Jesus refers to the wind, which is the same Greek word for spirit. You don't create or control the wind. Nor do you control God's Spirit. It "blows where it wills." This new birth is something you can only have as a gift. This is grace.

That night at Aldersgate, in a dull church meeting that John Wesley only attended with great reluctance, he got reborn from top to bottom. From that night on Wesley never stopped preaching about the gift of new birth. We United Methodists continue to tell this story and offer this invitation. No one is too sinful, too old, too set in his or her ways, too wise, too confused, or too dead to get a new birth. It all comes as a gift of grace.

Fiorello LaGuardia, who, when he was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of WWII, was called by adoring New Yorkers 'the Little Flower' because he was only five foot four and always wore a carnation in his lapel. He was a colorful character who used to ride the New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and whenever the New York newspapers were on strike, he would go on the radio and read the Sunday funnies to the kids.

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a real bad neighborhood, your Honor." the man told the mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson." LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions--ten dollars or ten days in jail." But even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He tossed a bill into his famous sombrero saying: "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

The following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation. ¹ What a marvelous example of grace.

The grace of God is the cornerstone of John Wesley's understanding of God. He describes three kinds of grace. The first is PREVENIENT GRACE. This is the grace that comes before. If we think about grace as God's love in action, then prevenient grace is God's love moving and acting in our lives before we are aware of it. It's why United Methodists baptize babies. We recognize that God's love and activity is present in a child even before the child is aware of it.

Have you ever looked back on an experience and saw how God was present, even though at the moment you didn't see God? Wesley experienced this. Looking back upon his life up to Aldersgate...the rescue from the burning parsonage as a child, the rigors of the Holy Club at Oxford, the frustrating journey as a missionary in Georgia, ...Wesley could feel an

1 Brennan Manning, The Ragamuffin Gospel, Multnomah, 1990, pp 91-2.

unseen hand, loving, guiding presence. Prevenient grace. Why not take some moments this week to reflect upon your life? Can you see when God was active even though you were not aware of God?

JUSTIFYING GRACE is that first awakening, that “new birth” experience. Justifying grace is when we become aware of the love of God in our lives. It is the initial, life-changing experience that sets us on the road back to God. At Aldersgate, Wesley experienced God’s justifying grace. Jesus had justified humanity to God nearly two thousand years before. But that night Wesley knew that Christ had justified him.

And so United Methodists believe in assurance of salvation. In other words we don’t have to be tossed about by doubts that we belong to God. I’ve heard Christians say, “I hope I’m good enough to get to heaven.” “I’m not sure God loves me today. I’ve made some wrong choices.” It is possible to trust in God’s justifying grace and be assured of its promise no matter what our condition.

I grew up in an evangelical, conservative United Methodist Church, where we heard a whole lot about justifying grace. It was almost as if this is where the grace appeared to end. We would hear endless testimonies about how folks were saved. Preachers tried hard to lead people to this climactic point of justifying grace. I heard various kinds of languages used to describe the same reality. Accept Jesus as your personal Savior. Give your life to Jesus. Get saved. Go forward during an altar call. All this was an attempt to help people become aware of God’s prevenient grace in their lives...to realize and respond to this initial awakening...to experience God’s justifying grace. Some asked the question of what happens after Aldersgate, but it never received the emphasis of the beginning new birth experience.

SANCTIFYING GRACE is what happens next according to Wesley. Sanctifying grace is the continuing presence of God’s activity in our lives after our conversion. God’s gift of grace doesn’t stop. God has all kinds of surprises in store for us. We may now be fully Christian, that is, fully accepted, forgiven, and reconciled. But God isn’t finished with us yet.

Sanctifying grace is the gift of God to us that enables and empowers us to grow in our ideas of God, to let go of childish and unsound images of God. Our faith becomes more complex, better able to withstand the buffeting of life. We grow in our commitment to serve God. We take on new challenges in Christian service which require greater spiritual maturity and energy. How have you been open to God’s sanctifying grace in your life?

Bishop William Willimon, the author of the book “Why I Am a United Methodist”, tells of the time when he was teach in a school of theology in Germany. Most of the students were speaking about the need for a reasonable, clear, well thought out faith. Willimon agreed, but added that emotion, feeling is also an important dimension of religious experience. Now the Germans are deeply suspicious of emotion. Their experience during Hitler’s reign of terror has convinced many of them that emotion can be dangerous and demonic. Willimon pointed out that emotion, like any human gift, can be used for good or bad. Feelings must be tested by the Bible. Willimon’s German friends were not convinced. Finally the German professor broke into the discussion, “Er ist ein Methodist.” He is a Methodist.

Willimon writes in his book, “Yes. That explains it. I’m a United Methodist. I really do believe that religion is, whatever else it is, a matter of a heart strangely warmed, a life impassioned as an offering to God.”²

Has your heart been strangely warmed? Do you have the assurance that you are loved by God? Have you been born again? It is possible. There is no perfect formula, no

² Why I Am a United Methodist, William Willimon, Abingdon, p. 31

required language, no one way to experience God's justifying grace. What is needed is a heart that opens to God, a heart that says yes to the saving grace of God, a heart that is willing to feel the warmth of God's love. If you've never made this step of faith I invite you to do so.