

The Marks of A Methodist
Mark 12:29-31; Romans 12:9-21
April 13, 2008

You may have heard of the country church which was invaded by mice. One day the pastor noticed a mouse disappear into a hole near the baptismal font. He gathered some elders to move the font to find the mouse. They discovered an entire nest of mice. The church members tried everything they could to get rid of the mice but nothing worked. The pastor called the local Pentecostal pastor for help. He came with his elders and prayed. But the mice did not disappear. They called the Baptist pastor and he came with mouse traps, but to no avail. Finally they called the Methodist pastor. He came, prayed, and sprinkled the mice with water. The mice all ran off. The other three pastors were amazed and asked what he did. The Methodist responded, "I baptized them, so now you'll only see them at Easter and Christmas."

Someone has suggested that "You Might Be A United Methodist If..."

- you don't take Roloids when your heart is strangely warmed;
- you felt that the NCAA penalties against SMU football were too harsh;
- you sit while singing "Stand up, stand up for Jesus;"
- half the people sitting in your pew lip-sync the words to the hymns;
- the word apportionment sends a chill down your spine;
- you realize pluralism isn't a communicable disease;
- names like Aldersgate, Asbury, and Epworth are vaguely familiar;
- you consider the monthly potluck a sacrament;
- the only church camp song you know by heart is "Kum ba yah;"
- your church is named for a geographical location rather than for a saint;
- your pastor moves every four or five years and you like it that way;
- you know that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral isn't a trick football play involving four lateral passes;
- you realize that *The Book of Discipline* is not a guide to getting your child to behave;
- you understand that an "appointment" has nothing to do with keeping a lunch date;
- you think UMW stands for United Methodist Women rather than United Mine Workers;
- you say "trespasses" instead of "debts" in the Lord's Prayer and have no idea why;
- you've ever sipped Welch's grape juice out of a plastic shot glass during Communion.

On a more serious note, what is a Methodist? The name arose as a belittling term referring to a group of four young men at Oxford University who observed a regular method of study and discipleship, which was unusual for students of their age. They were also referred to as "Bible moths." The term Methodist was preferable and has prevailed since Charles and John Wesley started that Holy Club around 1729.

Methodism began as a movement of spiritual renewal within the Church of England. As a priest in the Church, John Wesley saw a diminishing commitment and spiritual lethargy in the national church. He sought to instill a way of living in covenant with Christ and with fellow Christians that yielded rich spiritual fruit in their lives and in their engagement with the world. As the Methodist movement grew, Wesley was often asked about the characteristics of a Methodist. He wrote a tract in 1742 in which he explained the marks of a Methodist.¹ He emphasized the difference between essential beliefs of the Christian faith and mere opinions. He believed that Christians could be united by a few essential doctrines while having differing opinions about a whole range of things, such as mode of baptism or style of worship.

Let's hear the marks of a Methodist enumerated by John Wesley. A Methodist is one who loves God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength. "God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul." This wellspring of love deep within enables one to be "happy in God." There is a joy in knowing God. Frequently people seem to experience or understand God as primarily a judge who exacts punishment. While God does demand accountability for our actions, the primary way in which God desires to relate to us is not judgment but with joy. I think it is important to ask ourselves, "Does loving God bring me joy?" If we can't answer yes, then something is wrong. Perhaps our concept of God needs to change. Maybe our love for God needs to grow deeper so that it yields the fruit of joy in our lives. A Methodist is happy in God.

Another mark of a Methodist is one who "prays without ceasing." He doesn't mean that we are always in the house of prayer or on our knees or crying out to God. He means that the heart is always turned toward God. We are mindful of God's presence with us always, in our thoughts, in the world around us, in concerns that arise before us. More than a submission of our laundry list of requests to God, prayer is our relationship with God. Just as we need to be present, listening, and attentive to persons with whom we are in relationship, we need to be prayerfully present to God in order to develop that relationship. Prayer is one way in which we exercise our love for God.

A third mark is love of one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus notes this as the second greatest commandment. A consequence of loving God is a fourth mark, pure in heart. The love of God purifies our hearts from all revengeful passions, such things as envy, pride, malice, and wrath. This leaves room for mercy, kindness, humility, and patience to thrive within. Fifth is the desire not to do one's own will, but the will of God. One's focus is not on pleasing oneself, but rather on pleasing God. Closely related is the sixth mark of a Methodist, keeping the commandments of God.

A final mark outlined by Wesley is doing good to all people, including neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies. This includes caring for their bodies, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those who are sick or in prison. It includes nurturing souls so that they might have faith and peace in God.

In the essay in which he delineated these marks of Methodists, Wesley noted that these are the fundamental principles of all Christians. It is not the aim of Methodists to set themselves apart from other Christians. We are to be in communion with whoever seeks to living according to the Gospel of Christ and do the will of God. He desired that Christians not be divided among themselves. He said, "Is your heart right, as my heart is with yours? If so, give me your hand....Do you love and serve God? It is enough. I give you the right hand of fellowship."

Wesley was an advocate of a lived faith. He called people to holiness of heart and life. We are meant to put our faith into action. For this purpose he outlined three General Rules. The first is do no harm by avoiding evil of every kind. The examples of evil he insisted Methodists avoid include taking the name of God in vain; profaning the day of the Lord; drunkenness; slaveholding; fighting; returning evil for evil; uncharitable conversation; doing to others what we don't want them to do to us.

Imagine how our world might be transformed if we followed this first rule: do no harm, avoiding evil of every kind. We would evaluate every word before it comes out of our mouths asking, "Does this statement have the potential to cause harm?" Actions on personal, relational, communal, and global levels would be assessed by their potential to cause harm. You might protest that not everyone would accept this rule, so how could a few following it do any good. Change starts with one person and gradually it grows. If 13.7 million United Methodists

followed this rule with greater resolve, the way that we resolve conflicts and issues in our world would change.

If a foundational premise in approaching conflict is do no harm, the climate shifts. If we resolve to do no harm, we can no longer gossip about others involved. We cannot manipulate the facts of the issue. We cannot diminish those who disagree with us, but must honor each as a child of God. Living this rule demands great self-discipline and deep trust in God's wisdom, power, presence, and guidance. It requires us to loosen our own attachment to preconceived notions and solutions and binding ourselves more closely to Jesus' way and will.

Bishop Rueben Job writes, "To do no harm means that I will be on guard so that all my actions and even my silence will not add injury to another of God's children or to any part of God's creation....I will determine every day that my life will always be invested in the effort to bring healing instead of hurt; wholeness instead of division; and harmony with the ways of Jesus rather than with the ways of the world."ⁱⁱ

William Sloane Coffin told the story of an old man in India who sat down in the shade of an ancient banyan tree. Its roots stretched far into the swamp. Presently he discerned a small commotion where the roots entered the water. Concentrating his attention, he saw that a scorpion had become helplessly entangled in the roots. Pulling himself to his feet, he made his way carefully along the tops of the roots until he came to the place where the scorpion was trapped. He reached down to extricate it. But each time he touched the scorpion, it would lash his hand with its tail, stinging him painfully. Finally his hand was so swollen he could no longer close his fingers, so he withdrew to the shade of the tree to wait for the swelling to go down. As he arrived at the trunk, he saw a young man standing above him on the road laughing at him. "You're a fool," said the young man, "wasting your time trying to help a scorpion that can only do you harm." The old man replied: "Simply because it is in the nature of the scorpion to sting, should I give up my nature, which is to save?"

The second General Rule is do good. As we have opportunity, do good of every possible sort, and as far as possible, to all people. This was one of the principles mentioned earlier. We essentially do good by loving our neighbor, for love expresses itself in action. Bishop Job explains, "Doing good, like doing no harm, is a proactive way of living. I do not need to wait to be asked to do some good deed or provide some needed help. I do not need to wait until circumstances cry out for aid to relieve suffering or correct some horrible injustice. I can decide that my way of living will come down on the side of doing good to all in every circumstance and in every way I can. I can decide that I will choose a way of living that nourishes goodness and strengthens community."ⁱⁱⁱ

A man riding the subway noticed an old woman shuffled into the car wearing only ragged clothes to protect her from the bitter winter wind. Her white, cracked, bony hands clutched a worn shawl tightly around her. The man watched with wonder and pity.

At the next stop an energetic young man strode confidently onto the train. His warm, high-fashion clothes provided a stark contrast to the rider from the previous stop. As he made his way to his seat, his eyes lingered just a moment on the old woman. Three stops later, as the train slowed, he glided by her to the other door and disappeared into the tunnel. On the woman's lap lay his brown leather gloves.

The man who witnessed this encounter said, "I don't know if he was a Christian or not. But I do know this: He saw her need and responded with compassion—while I just sat there. It never occurred to me to give her my gloves. That young man showed compassion in a way I'll never forget."^{iv}

The third General Rule is stay in love with God. Staying in love takes practice. Wesley suggests several practices which help us stay in love with God: worship, the Lord's Supper, private and family prayer, searching the Scriptures, Bible study, and fasting. The consistent use of these spiritual disciplines provide moral direction for our lives. They keep us in touch with the healing, redeeming power of God. They make us attentive to opportunities to do good and assist us in growing in love not only of God, but of our neighbors and ourselves.

These three rules are one of the methods of Methodism:

do no harm by avoiding evil of every kind;

do good of every possible sort and as far as possible to all people;

stay in love with God by practicing the spiritual disciplines.

Living by these rules will enable us to cultivate the marks of Methodists: happiness in God, prayer without ceasing, love of neighbor, purity of heart, abiding by the will and commandments of God, and doing good. May God grant us courage to hold fast to the Wesleyan way of living and loving.

ⁱ John Wesley, *The Character of A Methodist*.

ⁱⁱ Rueben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 37-38.

^{iv} *Our Daily Bread*, February 6, 1997, quoted in *The Abingdon Preaching Annual 2001*, p. 263. Retrieved from *Homiletics Online*, April 12, 2008.

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