

August 6th, 2006

THANK GOD I'M A METHODIST

“It’s About Method”

Jeff Clinger

2 Kings 10:15-16

15 When he left there, he met Jehonadab son of Rechab coming to meet him; he greeted him, and said to him, ‘Is your heart as true to mine as mine is to yours?’ Jehonadab answered, ‘It is.’ Jehu said,* ‘If it is, give me your hand.’ So he gave him his hand. Jehu took him up with him into the chariot.¹⁶ He said, ‘Come with me, and see my zeal for the LORD.’ So he* had him ride in his chariot.*

Two weeks ago now 16 youth and adults from Ridge Church spent the week down in Slidell, Louisiana. We were with Project NOAH, a United Methodist work camp doing Hurricane Katrina Recovery work. I found out about Project NOAH last September – the story goes a little something like this. Immediately following Hurricane Katrina I was struggling to figure out how we as Ridge Church could respond. Alice Jenkins, who attends Ridge Church and is originally from the south, connected with me and reached out with possibilities. Her niece, RamonaLynn, is a District Superintendent in the Louisiana conference. RamonaLynn connected me with Slidell First UMC a congregation who had been flooded in the storm, but would be rebuilding. I had some phone conversations with Jerry Hilbun, their Senior Pastor, and he connected me with George Ragsdale, the youth Pastor at Baton Rouge First UMC, who was working to put together Project NOAH. And this summer United Methodist Youth Groups from 12 different states connected with Project NOAH and traveled to Louisiana to make a difference in people’s lives.

Being a part of something Project NOAH left me feeling very proud to be a United Methodist. Jerry Hilbun shared that since the Thursday, four days following Hurricane Katrina, there has been a United Methodist group from somewhere in the

country staying at Slidell First United Methodist every week, working to help them recover from the storm. The United Methodist Committee on Relief has committed to being on the ground in the Gulf Coast for five years, working on people's homes and being a part of the rebuilding. I am very proud to be a United Methodist.

As United Methodists we are a connectional Church – connected to one another by shared name and a shared history and a shared methodology. And so for the next three weeks I'm preaching a series that in reality could be much longer called – Thank God I'm a Methodist. I had thought about calling the series United Methodism 101, but my mom has reminded me that my task is to preach good news, not simply to lecture. So as we worship together this morning, I thank God I'm a Methodist.

Talking about United Methodism in New Member Classes and Bible Studies over the last several years I've come to realize that there are in general three different categories of United Methodists. There are those of us who are lifelong United Methodists and have spent some serious time wrestling with what that means historically and theologically and who can really articulate what it means to be a United Methodist. This group is a very small minority within the church! I believe most United Methodists fall into one of two categories: 1) people who were born into the church and have always been United Methodist and haven't given much thought to what that label means and 2) people who have chosen to join a United Methodist Church because of the programming the church offers or the relationships that the people have with others there.

Both of these are fine reasons to be a part of a church and this sermon series is primarily for those of you who are a part of Ridge Church for either of these reasons. It is my hope that through these next three weeks you might be able to gain a new

appreciation of United Methodism and come to even more deeply appreciate it's place in your life.

So, it is my hope that over the course of the next three weeks we can all gain a little bit of insight into what it means to be people called Methodists. I mentioned a couple of minutes ago that as United Methodists we have a shared history, a shared name, and a shared methodology. However, you might have noticed, that I did not say we share a set system of beliefs. There is a core of theology that we hold in common with the other historic Christian traditions and there are things about United Methodist theology that are unique and I'll address some of those in the next two weeks. However, this morning I want to focus on the methodology that we share as United Methodists.

John Wesley, an Anglican Priest from the late 1700's who started the Methodist Movement used four different things to inform his faith and his understanding of God's work in the world. These four things are scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. Say them with me now, Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. These were used very unofficially, as a method for discerning God's will and God's work. In recent years they have collectively come to be called the Methodist Quadrilateral. Essentially the Quadrilateral is a fancy word for a four pronged approach to faith and life – the four prongs being Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

Let's look briefly at each of these four pieces of faith, and how they are applied to questions of life, before we talk about their interaction that shapes our Methodist method.

Scripture – For Wesley this was the most important of the four, to consult the Bible and see what Scripture says about any given topic. When addressing an issue we have to consult the texts of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures for guidance.

Of course, as many of us are well aware, two people can look at the same Bible passage and come to different conclusions about its meaning. This is where the other three pieces of our method become so important.

Tradition – For Wesley the issue of Tradition went back to the early church and their interactions with one another. For us as Christians today, the idea of Tradition encompasses the two hundred plus years since Wesley, as well as all of the tradition before Wesley. When we address an issue we have to ask ourselves, how did the people who have come before us address issues of faith and life?

Experience – One of John Wesley's most formative life events was an experience of having his heart strangely warmed during a revival on Aldersgate Street. As a result of this our personal experience is an important part of our discernment process today. When facing an issue we have to ask ourselves, what does our personal experience with people tell us about this particular issue at hand?

Reason – God has given us the gift of free will and the human ability to think critically about decisions that we have to make and issues that are facing us. This is a gift from God and one that we are to employ in our faith development and decision making. When faced with an issue we must ask, what is reasonable in this situation? How do the gifts of Scripture, Tradition, and Experience inform our critical thinking and reasoning?

An analogy that I have found to be helpful is that our faith life is a car and each of these four pieces of the quadrilateral is a wheel. As we seek to travel down the road of life we can best travel down the road if each of our four tires is equally inflated. If any one of the four wheels gets over inflated we will have difficulty on our journey.

For example, some Southern Baptists could be accused of having an over inflated Scripture wheel. They can overemphasize the importance of scripture and completely disregard the experiences of life and the ability to think and reason. At the same time some Catholics could be accused of having an over inflated Tradition wheel – relying on what the church says about issues to the discredit of personal experience, and reason. Episcopalians on the other hand can be accused of having an over inflated reason wheel, thinking analytically and critically through each issue, analyzing the Holy Spirit right out of the situation. And finally, we as United Methodists have a tendency to over inflate our experience wheel, putting too much stock in our own personal experiences to the detriment of the tradition of the church or reason.

There is no Christian denomination that flawlessly navigates down the road of life with each of these four wheels perfectly in balance, but that is our aim as United Methodists. Our aim in decision making and in figuring out how God is working in our lives, should be to employ, scripture, tradition, experience and reason in balance. This Quadrilateral – or four sided approach to faith development is an important part of our United Methodist Identity. However, employing this method leaves us with the reality that all United Methodists aren't going to believe the exact same thing on all of the issues that face us in the world today.

There is a definite plus side to this – As United Methodist Christians we are free to use scripture, tradition, experience, and reason to let the Holy Spirit guide us as we think about tough issues like war, abortion, and sexuality. We are given freedom to be United Methodists and not to have to sign on a dotted line our allegiance to one political party or view point regarding an issue in the world. Each of us is free to use our

individual gifts of reason and our personal experiences to filter through the tradition of the church and the scripture.

The downside of this method for some is that we have a church today where people don't think exactly the same about different issues in the world. In the United Methodist Church, and even here at Ridge United Methodist Church, there are good people of faith who have studied the scriptures, looked at the tradition of the church, weighed their personal experience, and reasoned through the issues – and come out thinking very different things about those difficult issues. And because of our method, there can be people of good conscious and good faith who differ greatly in opinion when it comes to these hot button issues.

For some, this reality might be troubling. There are a great many people in the world who don't do well with the type of gray area that this method creates. There are many people who need cut and dry, yes and no, right and wrong answers to the tough questions of life. But, the beautiful thing about our United Methodist Method is that it allows for their to be theological difference amongst people who call themselves United Methodist.

Preparing for this sermon this week I have been reminded of a great story in Second Kings, it is one that John Wesley referenced in a sermon called “Catholic Spirit.” The story is about Jehu, the son of Ahab. Jehu is working to secure the land of his family and part of this work is to cleanse the land of Baal worshippers. As Jehu travels through the land he meets Jehonadab. As they meet Jehu reaches out and says, “Is your heart as true to mine as mine is to yours?” When Jehonadab answers that it is Jehu continues, “If

it is, give me your hand.” And Jehu pulls Jehonadab up onto his chariot so that they may journey together.

As we journey through life together as Christians called Methodist, there will be people who we encounter with whom we have little in common. There will be people whose view points are radically different than ours, there will be people who we struggle to understand. But part of what makes our denomination so great is the relationships and the connections. I don't know what Alice Jenkins, her niece RamonaLynn, The Rev. Jerry Hilbun, or George Ragsdale believe about sexuality, or abortion, or war and chances are I have different opinions than some of them on some of those topics. What I do know though, is the answer to Jehu's question, “Is your heart as true to mine as mine is to yours?” And that answer is yes.

So, as you journey through life, may you know God's love. May you know that God calls us to be connected to one another, to be in relationship with one another. May you use the gifts of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason to work out what it means to live as a United Methodist Christian in the world today. And while there will be others who use those four gifts to form their beliefs and think quite differently than you, may you invite them to journey with you, trusting that their hearts are as true to yours as yours is to theirs. It's about Method, yes. But this life of faith as United Methodist Christians is also about connection and relationship.