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THANK GOD I'M A METHODIST

“It’s about Personal Piety and Social Holiness (and it’s not that scary!)”

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1 Peter 1:22-23

“Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. ²³You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.”

For the last two weeks now we’ve been exploring our United Methodist Church as I’ve preached a brief series titled “Thank God I’m a Methodist.” Two weeks ago I talked about our method. As Methodists we use these four different things to discern the ways in which God is working in our lives and in the world as we make decisions about faith and life. These four pieces of faith and life that are to be weighed with one another are, Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason. Ideally we are to avoid overemphasizing any one of the four as we make decisions about God and life.

Last week then I talked about the importance of Grace for us as United Methodists. Grace is, at its core, God’s unconditional love and forgiveness. But, thanks to John Wesley the founder of the Methodist Movement, as United Methodists we have some more developed categories of grace. Wesley understood God’s grace to be working in the world in three different ways and talked about God’s gifts of Preventive Grace – the Grace that is offered to all people without cost, Justifying Grace – the Grace that accepts and forgives when we acknowledge God’s work in our lives and covenant to be in partnership with God, and Sanctifying Grace – the Grace that sustains us and journeys with us as we seek to live in harmony with God and one another. And as we talked about each of those three types of Grace we talked about the fact that God’s grace is a gift for

us that should change us and encourage us to grow. God loves us just the way we are, but God doesn't want us to stay that way!

The feedback I have received over the course of these last two weeks has been more positive than I ever would have dreamed. I have received several emails and people have stopped me to comment on pieces of my sermons that they have appreciated. One piece of feedback in particular has struck me though and I want to spend just a minute addressing it this morning. Somebody shared with me this last week that their Evangelical United Brethren heritage made them sensitive to the fact that I had titled the series "Thank God I'm a Methodist" rather than "Thank God I'm a United Methodist."

You see, as United Methodists we celebrate a heritage that goes back to John Wesley in the late 18th century, but we are really quite young as a denomination. The United Methodist church as it exists today only goes back to 1968 when two other denominations merged. As United Methodists then we are a joining together of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Our name United Methodist recognizes and incorporates both of those traditions. Rest assured though, that in my titling of the series "Thank God I'm a Methodist" I meant no disrespect to our former EUB members and friends – I was simply stealing the title from the song that parodies John Denver's "Thank God I'm a Country Boy." The United Methodist Church today is a product of a rich and diverse history – one that I am quite thankful to be a part of today.

And so this morning we have reached the end of our three week journey through some of what it means for us to be United Methodists. As we wrap up the series today, the core theme for our time together this morning is quite a mouthful. As United

Methodists, “It’s about personal piety and social holiness – and it’s not that scary!”

Really, I promise, it’s not that scary! Before we jump into those too big churchy phrases and unpack what they mean I want to take a few minutes to investigate a scripture passage that speaks to our theme for the day.

Our scripture passage this morning comes from the book of 1 Peter, a book that was likely written near the end of the 1st century to a more general audience. By that I mean that some of the letters found in scripture today were written to particular communities in response to particular issues. This is probably not the case with 1 Peter, it was written more for general instruction and encouragement to the early Christian communities. Specifically, 1 Peter 1:22-23, says the following, “*Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart.* ²³*You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.*”

The author of this letter would want members of the early Christian community to keep two important things in mind. First of all they were to love one another deeply and from the heart. But before telling them to do this, the author tells them why they are to do it, because they have purified their souls by obedience to the truth. Essentially, the author is reminding readers that they are in relationship with God and that God is working in their lives offering them love. In response to that love these persons are to love others in real and meaningful ways. It’s pretty simple really... God loves us. We are to love others. Both of these are important things to remember and life, at its best, is lived in a balance between these two things.

It is this need for balance that I want to emphasize this morning. I want to share two stories, both of which illustrate lives lived out of this balance. The first story is about an acquaintance of mine from college. For the sake of our time together this morning I'll call her Joy. Joy and I were in a program called Global Service Learning together and had the opportunity to travel and work together on a variety of projects. Joy grew up in a United Methodist Church and was working in one when I first met her. She was a year older than me and someone whose commitment to justice and passion I really looked up to. She was the kind of person who was always talking about a new political cause or social concern. She was quite educated and able to articulate much about the injustices of the world in ways that were compelling and inspiring. Being around Joy would get you fired up to make a difference in the world and to stand up for what was right.

After graduating from college Joy moved to Chicago and began working for a labor union. She worked harder and harder and harder investing herself fully in her work. She was working crazy hours, devoting all of her time and energy to her job, to her passion, to her cause. She took the weight of many people's problems on her shoulders, she began to carry the burden of many injustices and eventually Joy burned herself out and fell into a bad time of depression. Her life became so focused on trying to solve the problems of the world that she failed to take the time to care for herself.

The other story that I want to share is of a fictional character from a movie that came out a few years ago called "Saved." Saved is the story of a group of students from a Christian high school. Hilary Faye, one of the lead characters played by Mandy Moore, is the most popular girl in school and ultra holy. She is focused on purity and Godliness and concerned about others only insofar as it helps or benefits her. She is constantly

preaching to others about how they should live, but being mean, deceitful, and nasty in the mean time. As the school year progresses Hilary gets more and more nasty in her dealings with others. She is increasingly judgmental and even goes so far as to throw a Bible at one of her friends screaming, “I am filled with the love of Jesus!” In one of the final climactic scenes of the movie Hilary Faye has a breakdown and crashes her van into a huge statue of Jesus. Hilary Faye’s character is a caricature to be sure, but nonetheless it illustrates an important point. By becoming so consumed with her desire to be pure and holy and to convince others to be that way too, she sets up unrealistic expectations of herself and of the world around her. Ultimately, she breaks down, not able to maintain the façade of purity and holiness any longer.

Both of these stories illustrate extreme instances of two very important streams in our United Methodist tradition. Joy’s story illustrates a stream that John Wesley would have called Social Holiness. Social Holiness is the idea that as people of faith we have a responsibility to the world around us. Our relationship with God in Christ is to transform us and transform the ways in which we interact with others in the world. Hilary Faye’s story illustrates a stream of Christian spirituality that John Wesley would have called Personal Piety. Personal Piety is the idea that we are to live lives of devotion, prayer, reflection, and connection with God. It is through the connection with God that we receive assurance of love; that we are energized, recharged, and filled to do the work of God in the world.

Both of these streams of Christian living – Social Holiness and Personal Piety are important to us as United Methodist Christians, but either one taken to the extreme can become less than helpful. When Joy became so consumed with living out social holiness

she ceased to take the time to connect with God, to recharge her batteries, and to find the strength that she needed for her continued work. When Hilary Faye became so consumed with putting on a pious and religious appearance she ceased doing the work of Christ in the world, caring for persons who were truly in need, in ways that would truly be helpful. In both of these instances an overemphasis on either Social Holiness or Personal Piety left the person burned out and unhappy.

Both the themes of Social Holiness and Personal Piety were important for Wesley and are important parts of being a United Methodist today. These themes are both illustrated well in a little piece of United Methodist literature I recently received. Shortly after I began this series Dick Jones handed me a small pamphlet, called “The Character of a Methodist.” It is a Methodist religious tract of sorts that is a modern paraphrase of John Wesley’s original work of the same name. In this pamphlet the following is said regarding the idea of personal piety, our lived relationship with God. *“Methodists are people who have the love of God in their hearts. This is a gift of God’s Holy Spirit. And the same Spirit causes Methodists to love the Lord their God with all their hearts, with all their souls, with all their minds, with all their strengths.... Naturally Methodists are happy in God. Yes, they are always happy because Methodists have within them that “well of water” which Christ promised.”*

As United Methodists today we understand God’s gift of Grace, freely given to us, to be that well of water that can inspire and sustain us. As we respond to that Love and Grace in our lives we are called to participate in acts of Social Holiness. Wesley speaks of this in the following way, *“Methodists do good to all, their neighbors and strangers, their friends and enemies. This includes every kind of good. Naturally*

Methodists provide food for the hungry, clothing to the naked. They visit people who are sick and in prison. But even more important than this, Methodists labor to do good to the souls of people.”

Both of these streams of Christian faith, Personal Piety and Social Holiness are important in our United Methodist tradition. However, life at it's best for us as United Methodists, is a life lived in balance. It is vitally important that we form ourselves in our relationship with God – that we work on our personal piety: praying, reading scripture, connecting with God. And at the same time it is vitally important that we strive to live lives of Social Holiness: doing good works, reaching out to persons in need, and sharing God's love with others. This life of balance is the kind of life that we have seen lived by Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King, Jr., people who relied heavily on God's love forming them so that they could share that love as they sought to shape and form the world.

This need for balance is why we offer all of the ministries that we do at Ridge United Methodist Church. We don't expect that everyone will be involved in everything. We merely want to provide opportunities for people to both grow and serve. We hope that you would be involved in a class or a study or a group that helps you grow in your relationship with God and we hope that you would be involved in a ministry or a program that would help you live out what that relationship means to you by serving the world around you.

It is my hope that as each of you continues your journey through this life as a United Methodist you seek balance in all that you do. That you will sake a balance in scripture, tradition, experience, and reason as you wrestle with God's work in your life

and in the world; That you will seek a balance between understanding and accepting God's grace and sharing that Grace with the world; That you will seek a balance between the important streams of Social Holiness and Personal Piety.