

# Legacy: Remember Your Tradition

## Philippians 2:5-13

*We rejoice to be United Methodists!*

A sermon preached by  
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It always helps to remember that Methodism started as a joke. At Oxford University in the 1730's, Charles Wesley recruited his older brother John to lead a small group for prayer, study and service. John was so organized, that the group soon had schedules and guidelines for their devotional life. The other students, being more like college students, made fun of these seriously devout Christians, calling them "Bible Moths" and "Methodists." The Methodist name stuck. I'm glad it wasn't the Bible Moths; then we would be called "Mothodists."

What also stuck was our sense of humor. Throughout our history, people inside and outside the denomination have poked fun at the peculiar qualities of Methodists. Garrison Keillor, former host of "Prairie Home Companion" and not a Methodist, nevertheless wrote an essay and even composed a song about us. He wrote,

We make fun of Methodists for their blandness, their excessive calm, their fear of giving offense, their lack of speed and also for their secret fondness for macaroni and cheese. But nobody sings like them. If you were to ask an audience in New York City, a relatively Methodistless place, to sing along on the chorus of "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore," they will look daggers at you as if you had asked them to strip to their underwear. But if you do this among Methodists, they'll smile and row that boat ashore and up on the beach! And down the road!...

By our joining in harmony, we somehow promise that we will not forsake each other. I do believe this: These Methodists, who love to sing in four-part harmony, are the sort of people you could call up when you're in deep distress. If you're dying, they'll comfort you. If you're lonely, they'll talk to you. And if you're hungry, they'll give you tuna salad!

Methodists believe in prayer, but would practically die if asked to pray out loud.

Methodists believe their pastors will visit them in the hospital, even if they don't notify them that they are there.

Methodists believe in miracles and even expect miracles, especially during their stewardship programs or when passing the plate.

Methodists drink coffee as if it were the Third Sacrament.

Methodists believe that it is OK to poke fun at themselves and never take themselves too seriously.

And finally, you know you're a Methodist when:

— You hear something really funny during the sermon and smile as loudly as you can!

— Donuts are a line item in the church budget, just like coffee.

— A “Star Wars” fan says, “May the Force be with you,” and you respond, “and also with you.”<sup>1</sup>

Today we are making the second stop on my farewell tour called “Legacy.” Today I want to celebrate our tradition as United Methodists. I am a cradle Methodist, born and baptized in the First Methodist Church in Camden, Arkansas. I was confirmed the year The United Methodist Church was formed. I stayed one because I came to believe in the United Methodist way—the beliefs, practices, personality, and people of The United Methodist Church. This has been my extended family all my life.

If you will allow me to engage in a little non-sinful pride, I think there are reasons to be proud to be United Methodist. Teaching these reasons usually takes me an hour at a time for eight weeks, so I will just hit the high spots today.

We can be proud to be United Methodist because of our history. The story of the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, is remarkable in the history of Christianity. John organizing a nationwide revival, and Charles supplying the soundtrack of hymns, the Methodists are said to have prevented an English civil war like the French Revolution of the time. From a Bible study on Aldersgate Street in London, Methodism grew to a worldwide expression of Christianity. Today there are 80 Methodist denominations in 138 countries with a total membership of 80 million people.<sup>2</sup> This was a new kind of movement, based not on the support of a king or government, but on small groups of Christians seeking holiness together. It spread like wildfire through England to Ireland and to the American colonies.

American Methodism has its own wonderful story, as the circuit-riding preachers took the Gospel to the frontier and built churches at every crossroads in the growing young country. After the great split preceding the Civil War, the Methodists became famous for their involvement in social issues—abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, child labor, temperance. They also began to send missionaries around the world, creating a global movement in the name of Jesus Christ under the guiding principles of John Wesley.

Another reason to be proud to be United Methodist is our beliefs. Methodists are often misjudged as people who don't care much what you believe, as long as you're sincere. But in fact, the robust theology and doctrine of the Methodist faith is strong and vital and unique in the history of Christian thought. We share much in common with the historic doctrines of Christianity—the authority of Scripture, the Trinitarian nature of God, the Lordship of Christ, salvation by faith, the promise of eternal life, etc. But what sets Methodists apart is our theology of grace. Wesley taught three kinds of grace: prevenient grace, which brings us to God, justifying grace, which puts us in a right relationship with God, and sanctifying grace, which works in us to make us more holy as we grow into the likeness of Christ. We believe that Christians can be made perfect in love by the work of the Holy Spirit through sanctifying grace. This leads to the understanding of salvation as a life-long process, not an event, a growing relationship with God.

We also believe in every person as created with dignity and worth as a child of God. God don't make no junk! That makes a difference in how we treat people.

And though we believe that we are saved by God's grace through our faith, we also believe that faith is accompanied by good works. That's why Methodists are always busy, reaching out, helping people, sharing our love and resources with the community. That's who we are, and we rejoice in that.

A third reason to be proud of being United Methodist is our character. In typical Methodist fashion, it is not so much about what we believe as it is about how we act. There is a Methodist way of being in the world.

What does it mean to act like a Methodist? In 1742, John Wesley addressed this question in an essay called *The Character of a Methodist*.<sup>3</sup> He gave "five marks of a Methodist." They're pretty self-explanatory. Here they are:

(1) A Methodist loves God. That's the first half of the Great Commandment: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*"<sup>4</sup>

(2) A Methodist rejoices in God. We are a joyful Christian people, because God is good, all the time!

(3) A Methodist gives thanks. God has been good to you and me and us, and our hearts are filled with gratitude for all God's grace and blessings.

(4) A Methodist prays always. We know where our strength comes from, and we have to stay in touch with our Source.

(5) A Methodist loves others. That's the second half of the Great Commandment: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*"<sup>5</sup> In the end, it's all about love: God's love for us, Christ's love that would give his life for us, the Holy Spirit pouring love into us, our love for God, our love for Jesus, our love for all God's children. That's what makes a Methodist.

Finally, we can be proud today because of the continuing United Methodist witness. We are not perfect, by any means, but at our best, we are tolerant of our differences and inclusive of people who are not like us. United Methodists are rich and poor, black, white, brown, and all shades between, male and female, gay and straight, Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative. Our marketing slogan used to be "Open hearts, open minds, open doors." We are still striving to be that way. The image we use often is a big tent, which sounds like a circus, and sometimes it is. We used to brag that both George Bush and Hillary Clinton were United Methodists—they still are. But now we say that the United Methodist Church welcomes as members both Tom Cotton and Elizabeth Warren. That's a pretty big tent.

Because of our openness, we are very ecumenical. We respect and affirm other denominations and even other religions. We don't say anybody is going to hell because they don't believe or act like us. That's God's job, not ours. In his sermon on "Catholic Spirit," John Wesley said, "If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand."<sup>6</sup> Our witness is loving and inclusive.

Our witness is also missional. United Methodists are on the front lines helping people with real human needs. In Fort Smith, we are known as a church that cares for people and especially as a church that feeds people. Dozens of families receive groceries or meals every month through our programs of outreach. Our people are involved in several other non-profits in town that help alleviate human suffering. We give about 20 grants a year through our Foundation to community projects that share love and help people.

In Arkansas, United Methodists are making a difference. Ten years ago, there were 200,000 children in Arkansas who were food insecure. We started a program called 200,000 Reasons, and in five years we reduced child hunger by 25% in the state. 86% of United Methodist Churches in Arkansas have some sort of feeding ministry. The pandemic worsened the problem, so it's still a need. And now we have expanded 200,000 Reasons to include efforts for literacy and family stability.<sup>7</sup>

The crown jewel of United Methodist missions is the United Methodist Committee on Relief, the disaster relief agency that is recognized as one of the best in the world. Wherever there is a major disaster, UMCOR is there, internationally or in the United States. And they stay long-term, hosting mission groups at a disaster site sometime years after the news cycle has gone elsewhere. I read this week that UMCOR has already made emergency grants for Northwest Arkansas, and I'm sure we'll have information about how we can support recovery efforts before long.

Last Sunday, the tornado system that struck Northwest Arkansas also hit Claremore, Oklahoma, about 60 miles west of Arkansas. Rev. Tim McHugh is the pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Claremore. Pastor Tim is experienced in disaster response, so as soon as the tornado was past, he got out of his house and tried to navigate the streets. He said, "I went to check on my mother. I couldn't get to her. I had my chainsaw in the back and put chaps over my pajamas and just started cutting trees, clearing the road. Somebody recognized me and said, 'Oh good, the United Methodists are here.'"<sup>8</sup> Yes, we are, and that is good.

Our witness is inclusive, missional, and finally, connectional. John Wesley did not believe any church or group should stand alone. He said, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness."<sup>9</sup> He connected the Methodist revival through class meetings, societies, and conferences, and because of the connections, the movement lasted longer than Wesley did. The United Methodist Church today is still connected through local, district, state, regional, national, and international bodies. And maybe that seems like a lot. It is. But what our connection tells us is that we are not alone. Our ministry is part of something much bigger than ourselves. Our vision, our horizon is broader than our own little group of Methodists. And we can do so much more together than we could ever do alone. Think of the schools and hospitals and missions and seminaries that we support as part of our connection. And when we need it, the connection is there to support us. Like if your pastor retires, The United Methodist Church has a process to put another one in the pulpit immediately, so the church will not lose momentum.

There are still so many reasons to rejoice today because we are United Methodists. Honestly, it has not been our best season. The pandemic took a toll on every church, but to tell you the truth, the people who did the work and supported the ministry pretty much all came back after the pandemic. We also went through a denominational splintering, the largest in 180 years. We lost 25% of our churches, 24% of our membership. When you add in the churches that just closed for other reasons, we have lost about a third of our churches over the last decade. Most of those, truly, are churches that are in the last few years of their lifespan anyway. I am grateful that our church did not go down that divisive path. Our leaders held steady, and now we are facing the future from a position of relative strength. There are challenges ahead, and I'm going to say more about that in two weeks.

But for now, I want you to know that I believe the future is bright for First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith and The United Methodist Church as a whole. Our losses

will make us leaner, but they will allow us to get laser-focused on our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We have a great witness. We will be successful if we stay true to our historical tradition, our core beliefs, and our Methodist character, macaroni and cheese and all.

When I am gone, don't ever forget—it's great to be a United Methodist!

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Faulkner, <https://bigcircumstance.com/2007/07/10/methodism-according-to-garrison-keillor/>. The song he wrote is "Methodist Blues." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xT-weLjGtEs>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodism>.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Harper, *The Five Marks Of A Methodist* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 22:37.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 22:39.

<sup>6</sup> John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," *The Works of John Wesley, Third Edition*, Volume 5 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 499.

<sup>7</sup> <https://arumc.org/our-ministries/200k-more-reasons/>.

<sup>8</sup> Sam Hodges, "United Methodists offer help after deadly storms," United Methodist News Service, May 28, 2024. <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/united-methodists-offer-help-after-deadly-storms>.

<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, page viii.