



Sermon, Sunday March 24, 2024

“What does it mean to be a United Methodist Christian?”

by Pastor Paul

SCRIPTURE: John 13:34-35 ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Introduction: Our Mission for Spiritual Awakening

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ!

As we experience Lent, we spend this season reflecting on our inevitable death due to sin and meditating on the meaning of the Lord's death on the cross. Today is Palm Sunday. And Passion week begins tomorrow.

Compared to the past, science and material civilization are advancing very rapidly, but on the other hand, the nature of people living today does not seem to have changed much from before.

The world continues to struggle with all kinds of problems, and we are still broken by sin, and need salvation. In addition, we still face all kinds of temptations in the world, and unless the Lord pulls us out of the abyss of sin, we do not have the strength or ability to get out of that place on our own.

What does it mean to live as a disciple of Christ in this situation? Furthermore, what does it mean to live as a member of the United Methodist Church, which has inherited John Wesley's religious heritage? What is our identity? What can we do in this reality we exist in?

As Christians, we struggle to overcome our circumstances, but we know that the challenges we face are formidable. The institutional church we are a part of has lost much of its power and influence in American society. Now, in American society, the church is no longer a cultural center, and many people view our faith as outdated, unrealistic, and even harmful.

As a member of the United Methodist Church, and looking back on its history, John Wesley's Methodist movement in the 18th century helped restore faith when the church had lost its passion. This spiritual awakening must occur again in this era in which we live. And I hope that United Methodists will be at the center of this ministry.

Body: Abide in God's love

Wesley wrote the following in a sermon called ‘Thoughts Upon Methodism’: **“I am not concerned that the people called Methodists will disappear from Europe or America. But what I am concerned about is that they will remain a dead, powerless sect. If they neglect the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they began, they will undoubtedly do so.”**

As Wesley said, we must be wary of the Methodist Church remaining a dead sect with no power. So how can we get out of this situation? We can gain spiritual insight through Wesley's three general rules for salvation:



(1) do no harm to others, (2) do good, and (3) remain in God's love. Among these three rules, the most important is **'to remain in God's love.'** It is impossible for us to do good while not harming others without the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Because when we abide in God's love, we can love one another and become true disciples of the Lord. **Therefore, the first step for us to become disciples of the Lord is to dwell in God's love.**

So Wesley told United Methodists to always place Jesus Christ and his ministry at the center of their lives. This is because Jesus Christ is the essence of love. Additionally, Wesley believed that self-emptying love is the goal of Christian life and ministry. So he **"always emphasized God's love and grace and its practice."** To live as a disciple of Christ means to live a life that puts God's love and grace into practice.

We can see Wesley's emphasis on the practice of God's love and grace in his collection of sermons, **'The Biblical Way of Salvation'**, published in 1765. **"What must we practice for sanctification?"**

"First, public prayer, family prayer, secret prayer, participation in the Lord's Supper, study of the Bible by listening to it, reading it, and meditating on it, and fasting or abstinence as permitted by our physical health are things that are necessary for practicing piety."

"Secondly, the work has to do with the human body or soul, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining strangers, visiting those in prison, the sick, or suffering in various ways, and caring for the ignorant. Teaching, enlightening foolish sinners, awakening the lukewarm, supporting those who are wavering, comforting the weak, helping those in temptation, and saving souls from death are the practices of mercy. This practice is a form of repentance and produces the fruit of repentance that is essential for complete sanctification."

Wesley emphasized that for sanctification we must practice piety, salvation of the soul, and mercy toward our neighbors. And this work must be well carried out by the church, which as disciples of Jesus have inherited Wesley's religious heritage. That is why, despite the real challenges the church faces, the church is the hope of the world.

Apostle Paul called the church **'the body of Jesus Christ.'** We are all members of the body of our head, Jesus Christ. Christ came among us in the flesh 2,000 years ago, showed us the kingdom of God, and opened the way for us to reach that eternal kingdom. And He established the church to spread the gospel to the world. In this respect, there is nothing in the world that can replace the church. Although the church may appear shabby in the eyes of the world, we would never think that way if we knew the essence of the church. However, when we look at our lives, we realize how fragile we are.

We strive to live according to the will of our Lord Jesus Christ. Sometimes, there comes a moment when we completely agree with the Lord's will. But no one can say that we always live in harmony with the Lord. As we live each day, we often forget the Lord. Also, there are many times when we do not do the will of the Lord even though we know it. This is no exception, even for those with the best will and best efforts.

Because there are such diverse believers gathered in the church, a perfect church cannot exist. Probably, it has never happened, and will never happen in the future, that all members of the church perfectly discern and obey the Lord's will.

Nevertheless, the church is a community called to the precious mission of spreading the will and love of the Lord, the hope of the world and the essence of love, to the world. Therefore, living as disciples of Christ means we must practice love for soul salvation and social justice.

In relation to this, I would like to share with you the story of Wesley's dream about heaven and hell, which well reflects his thoughts on the mission of the church.

John Wesley had a dream which affected his life's work tremendously. He dreamed that he died and came to the gate of heaven. He was anxious to know who had been admitted, so he questioned the keeper:



“Are there any Presbyterians here?”

“None”, replied to the keeper of the gate.

Wesley was surprised. “Have you any Anglicans?” he asked.

“No one!” was the reply.

“Surely, there must be many Baptists in Heaven?”

“No, none”, replied to the keeper.

Wesley grew pale. He was afraid to ask his next question:

“How many Methodists are there in heaven?”

“Not one,” answered the keeper quickly.

Wesley’s heart was filled with wonder. The angel at the gate then told Wesley that there were no earthly distinctions in heaven. “All of us here in heaven are one in Christ. We are just an assembly who love the Lord”.

Wesley was then taken downward, downward to the entrance of Hell. He met the keeper of the gate there.

“Have you any Presbyterians here?” asked Wesley.

“Oh, yes, many,” answered the keeper.

Wesley stood still, “Have you any Anglicans?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, many”, answered the keeper.

“Are there Baptists in there”? Wesley continued to ask.

“Of course, many,” replied the keeper.

“Wesley was afraid to ask the next question. “Are there any Methodists in Hell?”

The keeper of the gate grinned. “Oh Yes, there are many Methodists here.”

Wesley could hardly speak. “Tell me, have you any there who love the Lord?”

“No, no, not one, not one” he answered. “No one in Hell loves the Lord.”

So, it follows today, no member, (let alone deacon, or other title holders) of any denomination will make it to heaven! Heaven is for those who love the Lord, not those who belong to any denomination, no matter how ‘spiritual’. Don’t be caught in the trap. Join the body of Christ, not denomination! You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in this work. And go not only to those who need you, but to those who need you most.

I really love Wesley's dream story about heaven and hell. Because Wesley's religious identity is revealed very clearly in this dream. ‘**All of us here in heaven are one in Christ.**’ We can see Wesley's spirit of inclusion, tolerance, and unity in the words, ‘**We are just an assembly who love the Lord.**’ We can also be sure of what the church community is from the words ‘**assembly who love the Lord.**’ And we can see the passion for salvation for all souls around the world.

Conclusion: Love one another

Now let’s summarize today’s message. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ! Today is Palm Sunday. And Passion week begins tomorrow. Jesus entered Jerusalem, welcomed by the people. And because of the people's



betrayal, he died on the cross. The reason Jesus died on the cross was because he absolutely obeyed the will of God and loved all people in the world. So, in the cross where Jesus shed blood, there is His love for the world. In today's text, Jesus commands; **"Love one another; even as I have loved you."** We must be able to obey these commands of Jesus.

Now, going back to the previous question, what does it mean to live as a disciple of Christ? Furthermore, what does it mean to live as a member of the United Methodist Church, which has inherited the tradition of John Wesley's religious heritage?

First, it is to abide in God's love. This makes it clear that the starting point of love for our neighbors is the grace and power of the Lord. The holiness of our lives and our distinction from the world are not due to our own efforts or abilities, but to the grace and power of the Lord. This is the basis of our religious life.

Second, we must live by putting God's love and grace into practice in the world. Therefore, faith without action is dead faith, and the Holy Spirit works when we act in love toward our neighbors.

Lastly, the two most important aspects of our practice are the salvation of souls and justice for society.

There are various religions, denominations, and sects in the world we live in. However, among the many religions, denominations, and small sects, it is a blessing to belong to a denomination that can well reflect our worldview and lead a religious life. The United Methodist Church is a church that is faithful to the essence of the gospel, responds sensitively to various problems in the world, and is open to the world with an inclusive spirit. Therefore, we must better fulfill the Lord's command, **'Love one another; even as I have loved you.'** I hope we all enjoy this blessing. **Amen!**

