

January 18, 2026
Hunter Wade preaching

I have always felt a really strong sense that I am meant to serve others. This has always been connected to my faith in God for as long as I can remember. But the shape of what I imagined that service would be and my idea of the “other” that I imagined I would be serving has changed drastically over time.

When I was in middle school, I got really, really into my faith. I started asking my parents if I could go to church every time the doors were open and they were like that’s a little intense but okay sure! Getting more into my faith only intensified this sense that I was meant to serve the world. I remember coming home from a youth mission trip and telling my mom that I felt God was calling me to be a missionary. Without missing a beat my mom looks at me and says, “Oh honey that’s wonderful... that you want to be a missionary doctor!” And because she is my mom and moms are always right I was like, ya that must’ve been what I said, even though it was certainly not what I meant.

Thankfully, you can only pretend to be someone you are not for so long, and my love of words and stories and the scripture came to light as my dislike of science and math and deep desire to NOT be a doctor came to light. And, through a series of events that can only have been facilitated in some way by the Loving Divine, I found myself at Belmont University studying theology hoping to go into ministry. (My mom got on board and is the most supportive, don’t worry.)

I declared the major “Faith and Social Justice” which was essentially a Christian ethics degree. This was a new version of that same pull I had always felt was so intertwined with my attempts to follow Jesus: I wanted to help people, I felt compelled to serve the world. But the thing about studying Christian ethics is that you essentially study Christian un-ethics, or at least that is how it felt. At the same time I was attending a wildly charismatic church that really valued the Holy Spirit but somehow that never led them to serve their neighbors in tangible ways, only in prayer.

Throughout college I lived at a level of cognitive dissonance that broke down my longheld belief that faith and justice were inextricably linked. Or at least, I still believed they were but I did not know how to live that out or how to square what I was learning in class with what I was hearing from the pulpit.

This dissonance and tension between faith and action, and church and social justice only intensified as I went to seminary. Seminary alone will do that to you, but one semester into my 3 year degree, the pandemic began. I felt like I was getting a real

time example of Christian un-ethics. It became nearly too much to bear emotionally and spiritually trying to hold onto both faith and justice.

I graduated from seminary only four years ago. And it has taken nearly as much time for the pieces of my own spiritual life to begin to come back together. I have lived many years with tatters of what I thought I believed about God and no idea how to actually live that belief. It is a devastating place to live, and I know many of us have been there.

Back in November, Jim Robinson and Steve Bryant taught a class I accidentally dubbed “Methodism 101” to the GIFT Sunday School class. (Shameless plug, this effort is a part of our Discipleship Pathways initiative and if you want to have a similar class taught to your Sunday school class please email me!) One class period was focused entirely on the Methodist Social Principles. Being a fairly new Methodist, as you all know, I had a vague idea of what the social principles entailed but I had not studied them to any extent.

Turns out, the Social Principles are INCREDIBLE! They are the whole United Methodist Church coming together and saying this is what we think faith looks like out in the world. This is how we want to respond as Christians to the immense injustice in our communities both local and global. The introduction to the 2025 edition of the Social Principles puts it like this, “The Social Principles are a good faith response to what we believe God is already doing in our lives and in the public square. They can be clearly marked signposts on our journey toward living fully into God’s gracious love for the world’ they give us clear direction.”

As we went through the social principles together as a class, my heart was racing and my mind was alight with how incredibly detailed and on point these social convictions seemed to me. It felt like my inner compass was being expressed into words and read back aloud to me. It felt like the biggest affirmation of faith and justice being inextricably linked, and spelled out with great tangible detail what that looks like rather than just vague promises of better days.

If I am being honest, reading the Social Principles for the first time felt a little bit like falling in love. And that is how I know that although I am a new United Methodist, I am going to become an insufferableeeeeee Methodist nerd— prepare yourselves.

The Social Principles are broken down to sections of different communities, or ways we relate to one another, in our world: that of creation, economics, social, and political. I wish we could walk through them together now because what is most impressive to me is the level of granularity of addressing every issue they could think of when it comes to

caring for creation, just economic practices, living in social communities where everyone can flourish, and engaging in politics with our faith in a loving God front and center. You name it, it is in there. And yall.... It is RADICAL.

And here is what I think might be the best part! While the version of the Social Principles I am referring to was adopted in 2024, there has always been a version of this from the very beginning of United Methodism! This is not something new, it has always been a conviction of Methodists that faith and justice are inextricably linked and the way that we live in the world should reflect that! The Wesleyan mandate to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” has always been SOCIAL. John Wesley talked about spreading “scriptural holiness” and that meant social justice.

It’s almost like John Wesley was thinking about Isaiah 58:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

7

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator^[b] shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Isaiah 58 shows us that faith and social justice have always been inextricably connected. Isaiah 58 goes as far as to say that **social justice IS discipleship! There is not a way to live a faithful life to God that does not include justice for your neighbors.**

Perhaps the best example of this, that social justice is discipleship, that we have in our modern American imagination is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We sometimes forget the Reverend part of his title. Everything that MLK did was rooted in and motivated by his faith in Christ. **For those who are ready to leave Christianity to the**

loudest voices, those who make a mockery of the Gospel of love and justice, I would remind us that if MLK can be a Christian then there must be something left in this old story to hold onto.

And that is a strong statement, but I say it without judgement because that was me. I reached a point in seminary when the cognitive dissonance and all the tatters of my faith and what I thought was true was too much to bear. I couldn't think of a good reason to stay a Christian besides the fact that I wanted to. I had deconstructed to the point where there was nothing left. So, I don't take any ounce of faith and belief and conviction I have today for granted. Because it is by grace alone that I am still here, still tied up with the Christian story, still convinced there's some Good News left in it.

I later told Paul that I wished someone had given me the Methodist Social Principles when I was in college because it would have changed everything. In the way he usually does, Paul asked why. And I said because it would have shown me that I was not alone, it would have given me a way forward. In a way it feels like I have been wandering out in the wilderness attempting to cling to my sense of faith and my sense of justice. Reading the Social Principles felt like coming home after a long journey in the wilderness to a home I wasn't sure existed.

That's why I am passionate about talking about it with you this morning. Because it is hard out there yall. I know it, I read the news, I am attempting to be a human right along with you. And man could we use something now that feels like a reprieve from the wilderness.

"The world is literally hanging under the threat of extinction. Indeed, a sense of impending doom seems almost prerequisite to an ecclesial statement on social witness, many of which are born of a sense of crisis." That's a quote from Bishop James S. Thomas in reference to the need for the United Methodist Church to state clearly and explicitly its Social Principles. Want to guess when he said that? . . . 1968.

Something about that is so comforting to me. Yall this, all this chaos and evil, it is not new. It might be new to us because we have been insulated by it by varying degrees of privilege, but it is not new. John Wesley knew it so he lived his life with the conviction that faith and social justice are inextricably linked. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. knew it, and so he lived his life with the conviction that faith and justice are inextricably linked. So what are we to do if not the same.

There is work to be done, of course there is. There is evil and chaos abounding, of course there is. But God is at work. The force of Love that brought all of this into being will not be overcome. And we get to co-labor with that force of love.

We need to take some deep breaths. We need to take breaks. We need to eat good meals with people we love. We need to read our Bibles and say our prayers *to* remember the story of how Love wins. Then, we need to get back out there, in our own little, specific, small way, and get to work right alongside the Christ we claim to follow.

Social justice IS discipleship, yall. And we are not alone in believing that.