

Sermon 7-25-21
Paul Purdue preaching

Knowing Love Beyond Knowledge

On Monday, I used this pair of scissors and performed the priestly function of cutting the ribbon on one of the tiny homes at the Village at Glenclyff. I felt a holy rush like I was lifting the Communion chalice or elevating the offering plate to God for the first time. A priest links the people to God, and so, with these golden scissors, represented you, my Belmont friends, we blessed a space for people without housing to recover after being hospitalized. Bobby Watts, head of National Healthcare for the Homeless council, thanked the people of the Methodist Church, especially Glenclyff, sharing how the Village at Glenclyff is the first medical respite village in the United States! It felt like a Methodist family reunion as so many of my favorite Methodist people were there. Still, in the midst of the congratulatory greetings, Gairdt's quiches, and the jazz quartet's joyous arrangements, Pastor Ingrid McIntyre reminded us that this beautiful kin-dom vision also faced stiff opposition and uphill battles.

"Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of humans willing to be co-workers with God." Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Letters from a Birmingham jail

This summer, as lectionary cycle B passes through Ephesians, the editors skip over the story of the church struggling to learn something new. In the passages that precede our lesson, the Ephesian writer reminds us that Paul was beaten and imprisoned for bringing *"the good news about the immeasurable riches of Christ to the Gentiles."* Riots broke out as Paul sought to fully include those once unwelcome due to their uncircumcised status. The writer speaks as Paul saying, *"God showed me God's secret plan in a revelation.... Earlier generations didn't know this hidden plan that God has now revealed... God sent me to reveal the secret plan that had been hidden since the beginning of time, God's purpose is now to show the rulers and powers in the heavens the many different varieties of God's wisdom through the church... In Christ we have bold confidence... so I ask you not to become discouraged by what I'm suffering."* Some Christian folks can't handle the idea that God might show us something new. We forget how the Methodist Church South defended slavery with Bible passages like Ephesians 6:2 or Titus 2:9. Wesley called slavery "the sum of all villianies" and America's extreme racial slavery "as the vilest under the sun." Today, parts of the church cite scriptures to deny women full clergy rights! It is unsettling to think God might teach us something new, but God has shown us new things from Abraham to Moses, Elijah to Mary, Jesus to Paul, John Wesley to Dr. King. The Spirit still speaks!

John and Charles Wesley did not hire a PR firm to select the name Methodist. Methodist was an eighteenth century burn whereby critics ridiculed the Wesleys strict adherence to spiritual disciplines. As John and Charles Wesley advocated for social and spiritual change, they received push back, encountering accusations, beatings and riots. The Methodists built a free school for poor children before building the first chapel. They published 453 educational works including many books promoting literacy. Meeting houses often served a dual purpose as orphanages, housing for widows, and kitchens for the hungry. Methodist chapels were often empowerment centers, helping people find work or learn trades. They only reserved the chancel for singular sacred use. Imagine rolling our pews out and placing looms and spinning wheels in our sanctuary! The early Methodists considered full employment as sacred as pew cushions. Wesley opened perhaps the first free medical clinic in England in London in 1746 and a second in 1747 in Bristol, and then divided London in 46 districts and trained lay persons to visit the sick in each of these districts. Wesley published books like Dr. Tissot's "Advice on Respect to Health" knowing many could not afford a doctor.

Wesley was criticized on many theological fronts. Church folks frowned on the Methodist for open air preaching in town squares or as coal miners congregated at shift changes. The church did not like

Wesley's encouraging all kinds of people to attend church and often did not welcome commoners in worship. The bishops railed against Wesley for using unordained lay pastors to lead church meetings and roundly condemned Wesley for ordaining Coke and Asbury as bishops to America. They thought the Methodists were too enthusiastic, too common, and too loud when they sang. Wesley was too blunt about the use of money, fair wages, and problems poor people faced. They went bonkers when Wesley appointed Mary Bosanquet and Sarah Crosby to the office of "exhorter" or preacher. They accused Wesley of dividing the church, preaching outside the bounds of the parish system, talking too much about the inward witness of the Spirit, and teaching Christian perfection.

John and Charles Wesley were spiritual innovators in producing a prodigious amount of contemporary music. Charles was a contemporary music artist writing over 6,000 hymns, only 57 remain in our present UM hymnal. He wrote music for common people and drew new people into church.

All this theological, worship, and social change sparked resistance from church folks. Stirred on by an upset vicar, a mob attacked Wesley in October of 1743, dragging the Oxford Greek professor by his long flowing hair through the streets of Wednesbury. The next day, John shared with his brother Charles how he felt the care of guardian angels as some of the early martyrs. John reported how only two blows from local ruffians actually struck him and that neither blow hurt. Where John felt the angels, Charles suggested that his 5' 5" 120 pound brother might have escaped the blows "due to his low stature." Was that brotherly burn founded in sibling rivalry or seeking to keep it real spiritually? The Wednesbury justice of the peace blamed the mob's violent looting on the Methodist preachers "who go about raising routes and riots to the great damage of his Majesty's lead people and against the peace of our sovereign Lord the king." (Wesley and the People called Methodist, page 132) 278 years later, civil and church officials often blame those who speak out against injustice as the cause of the problem, when they are simply exposing the ugly systemic racism, oppressive classism, or endemic homophobia.

Jesus warns us in Matthew 23, that when we build a statue of John Wesley or canonize the hymn stylings of Charles we are likely resisting the very prophetic Spirit that flowed through them. We quote the past prophets in unspoken surety that God has no new secret plans to unveil, but the Spirit is still speaking.

Decades ago during seminary, I read John Wesley's "On Christian Perfection" for the first time. I wrote a judgy spirited rebuttal in the margins. At my ordination, the bishop asked my ordination class Wesley's first historic question, "Do you have faith in Christ?" The bishop then smiled and offered us a theological off-ramp saying there are many ways to understand Wesley's next question, "Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life? Are you earnestly striving after it?" As God's grace continues to liberate me from my past literalism, the idea of Christian perfection does not scare me so much. I may not think I will be made perfect in love in this life, but let me with every ounce of my being earnestly striving after love. Let me devote myself wholly to loving God and neighbor. Is not love the only worthy measure of any life? Is not love always unsettling the church by examining who is not included?

I reread Wesley's on Christian perfection Sunday afternoon. I relaxed and let it speak to me. So I invite you to hear Wesley the rabble rouser on love:

Love is the fulfilling of the law- the end of the commandment. Love is not only the first and great command, but all the commandments in one. Whatsoever things are just, praiseworthy, pure, or an avenue for virtue, they are found in love. Love is perfection, glory, and happiness. Love is the royal law of heaven and earth. Love is the one perfect good that must be your one ultimate end....Perfect love now casts out fear and we rejoice. And loving God, we love our neighbours as ourselves, we

love every human as we love our own soul. We love enemies, and yes, even the enemies of God. And if it is not in our power to 'do good to them that hate us,' we do not stop praying for them. Love purifies our hearts from envy, malice, wrath, unkind temper, pride, and all things contrary to love. Love keeps the door of our lips. Deep in our bowels (in the midst of life's crap) we put on mercy, kindness, humble self-assessment, tenderness, meekness, patience, and honesty. (Being made perfect in love) does not mean we are "free from ignorance, mistakes, slowness of understanding, a (goofy) imagination, (bad theology), poor grammar, ungraceful pronunciation or a thousand nameless defects in conversation or behaviour. Indeed love itself may incline us to make more mistakes. Love and knowledge do not always go together. Still, love is the highest gift of God: humble, gentle, patient love; all visions, revelations, manifestations of whatever, are little things compared to love. They are infinitely inferior to love. Let us all be thoroughly sensible of this, the heaven of heavens is love. There is nothing higher in religion; there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark.

So the Apostle Paul and the Wesley brothers had beautiful new insights and innovations. We have an old message of God's kin-dom coming on earth and a new insight that all people really means all people. In the past church, people resisted God's hidden plans or new ideas, and "we know in part" (1 Corinthians 13) but at the end of the day "the heaven of heavens is love. There is nothing higher in religion; there is nothing else."

So after fighting with excluding systems for the new idea of including the Gentiles, the Apostle Paul writes, "So I kneel before you, holy Creator. You recognize every tribe in heaven and on earth. And I pray that God will strengthen each of us in our inner selves, with the richness of God's glorious Spirit. I ask that Christ might live in each of our hearts through faith, and that we might be rooted and grounded in love, so that each of us with all the saints might have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, and that we might know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so that we might be filled with the fullness of God. Oh, glorious God, You are able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine. We marvel that Your power is at work within us. Come, Lord Jesus, teach us to love, be that one perfect good that is our one ultimate end. Amen.