

Sermon 2019.10.27

Stay in Love With God

(John 15:9-12 MSG; sermon 4 of 4 in Reconciling series “The Methodist Way”)

1. The Methodist Way. Today we are wrapping up our October series, The Methodist Way. We’ve been looking at LGBTQ Reconciling from a specifically Methodist point of view.

We’ve talked about the Big Tent, John Wesley’s insistence that we don’t have to think alike in order to love alike. Methodists have traditionally had diverse opinions on many theological issues.



Big Tent



Three General Rules



Quadrilateral

1. The Methodist way.

We’ve looked at the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the four tools Wesley applied to questions of faith and scripture interpretation. First, and above all, what does scripture say - especially the scriptures about Jesus? Second, what does the tradition of the church say? Third, what does our reason say? And fourth, is our interpretation confirmed or challenged by real-world experience?

Finally, we’ve been using John Wesley’s Three General Rules for Methodists: 1. Do no harm; 2. Do good; and 3. Stay in love with God.

2. Stay in love with God. Today we’re going to focus on the third rule. Wesley had an archaic way of phrasing this, “attend upon all the ordinances of God,” by which he meant do the things that keep us close to God like going to worship, taking communion, reading scripture, and praying.

When we regularly participate in worship, sacraments, prayer, and scripture reading with our sister and brother Christians, we keep ourselves close to God. Our belief shapes our practice; our practice shapes our belief.

This is a practical way of living out the great commandment: “Love God with everything you’ve got, and love your neighbors as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31).

3. The wrong question. That’s really the main thing about Christianity in general, and Methodists in particular: we are all about the grace and love of God, and how we reflect that love back to God and share it with each other. Yet we forget the main thing and we begin to ask each other the wrong questions.

1 Do no harm.

2 Do good.

3 STAY IN LOVE WITH GOD.



2. Stay in love with God.



3. The wrong question.

Many of you know that we have kids stop by the church on their way home from school looking for snacks. Last year, a new girl - probably about 10 years old - came. She had questions. Boy-oh-boy, did she have questions...

While her friend was in the bathroom, this girl began to grill me in the hallway.

“What kind of church is this?” United Methodist, I answered.

“Is that like Catholic or Lutheran?” Um... kind of. We all believe most of the same stuff about Jesus.

“What do you believe?” Now, that’s a big question to answer with a 10-year-old while waiting for someone to finish using the bathroom. I took a second to gather my thoughts, and began talking about Jesus’ love and grace.

The girl interrupted me to ask, “Do you let gay people come here?” Yes, I said, we let everybody come here, because we believe God loves everyone...

She interrupted me again, “My church doesn’t let gay people come.” And that, as far as she was concerned, was the end of the conversation.

Friends, this broke my heart: that anyone would think the most important thing to know about a church is, “how do you feel about gay people?” And even more, that it would be the first question a 10-year-old would ask. What are we teaching our children, or what are they learning from us by watching our behavior?

4. The main thing. Yet this is exactly what many non-Christians see and despise about Christians: that we are judgmental and we have lists of rules about who’s in and who’s out.

Friends when we begin to draw lines and make distinctions and try to put a box around God’s grace and love, we are forgetting the main thing - the great Commandment. Jesus restates it again in our reading from John today, “I’ve loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love... This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you” (John 15:9,12 MSG).

I love the way *The Message* phrases this: make yourselves at home in the love of God, and love one another as Christ loves us.

So in some ways that girl’s question is the right question, depending on our answer. The question can be asked a hundred ways: Do you let gay people come here? Do you let straight people come here? Do you let poor people come here? Do you let rich people come here? Do you let immigrants come here? Tall, short, thick, thin, black, white, sinners, saints, healthy, sick... do you let them all come here?



It's the right question if we give the right answer: Yes. We let everybody come here, because God loves everybody, and Jesus commands us to love everybody too. That's the main thing about Christians – we love everybody as Jesus loves us.

5. Legalism vs. love. In Matthew's gospel, when Jesus states the Great Commandment, "Love God and love neighbor as you love yourself," he adds "On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 25:40). All the Old Testament is built on love of God and neighbor.



Remember the Quadrilateral? Our primary resource for understanding scripture is other scripture. Here, Jesus says the scripture that stands above all, the scriptural lens through which we need to read and interpret all other scripture, is the great commandment to love God and love neighbor. In the ancient debate between legalism and love, Jesus is coming down firmly on the side of love.

The Pharisees were rule-followers to the Nth degree. They often criticized Jesus for breaking the rules – healing on the Sabbath, or letting his disciples pick grain to feed themselves. Jesus always came back with the law of love: isn't the Sabbath made for man, and not man for the Sabbath? Isn't it better to show love and mercy than to be bound by rigid rules?

Yet it is so easy to forget this lesson, to sin and fall short of the glory of God. We love rules, because then we can figure out how to cheat. We like lists, because then we can hide behind them instead of doing the hard work of thinking and reasoning and loving.

Part of my own long journey from a traditional point of view on homosexuality to a more progressive, reconciling one was a Pharisee moment. I was ordained at the Wisconsin Annual Conference in 2012. So that was the first year I was able to vote in the clergy session.

That also happened to be the year that Rev. Amy DeLong brought her report to the clergy session. Pastor Amy had made herself a test case in Wisconsin. Remember that the two things our *Book of Discipline* prohibits are self-avowed, practicing homosexual clergy, and doing same-sex marriages. So Amy announced that she was married to a woman, and she conducted a same-sex marriage. She had been brought to trial, taken out of the local church she was serving, and sentenced to write a report on our clergy covenant. 2012 was the year she came to present her report.

Amy's report was really good, talking about the ways we love and support each other as pastors. It made some suggestions about our life together, one of which was that we shouldn't put each other on trial over disputed matters like human sexuality. This seemed to me to violate the *Book of Discipline*, so when it came time for the pastors to receive the report, I was one of a handful who voted against it – even though I agreed with most of it – because of one point that I thought broke a rule in the *Discipline*.

That was my very first official vote as an ordained pastor in The United Methodist Church. And immediately I had a Paul-on-the-Damascus-Road revelation. It was like a spotlight from heaven shone on me. “My God,” I thought, “I’m a pharisee. I just voted for strict adherence to the letter of the law, instead of voting to love my neighbor.”

I chose legalism over love... in opposition to Jesus’ commandment to love each other as Jesus has loved us. And right there, I vowed not to make the same mistake again.

6. Good news! Friends, we’ve got to keep the main thing the main thing. Jesus says the main thing is to love God with everything we’ve got, and to love one another as he loves us.

Yet we keep going back to our lists and rules, making excuses not to love one another. And every time we set up a human wall, separating ourselves from “those other folks,” God comes along and knocks it down. Samaritans, Gentiles, black people, women clergy, divorced people, LGBTQ people... God erases the lines.



We can never forget the Good News of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Everyone who believes in Jesus may be saved... Everyone, everyone, everyone.

Jesus continues in 3:17, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

If Jesus didn’t come to condemn the world, who are we to condemn people? We are not commanded to judge, but to love.

7. Loving promises. Today we are celebrating a baptism at church, and I can think of no clearer example of God’s love. We baptize babies because God loves them. We don’t know how a baby will grow up, or what kind of person they will be, and yet we know for an absolute fact that God will love that person from cradle to grave. As parents and godparents and church family, we vow to raise each child up fully immersed in the love of God.



The vows we make on behalf of children, the vows we renew at our confirmation, the membership vows we all take when we join the church are clear: “to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.”

Sometimes the evil, the injustice, the oppression we resist is internal. Anytime we find ourselves rejecting someone because of a list or rule, anytime we find ourselves trying to put a boundary on the love of God, we need to resist. We need to keep the main thing, the main thing: “Love God, and love your neighbors – all your neighbors.”

Let’s conclude today’s message by reiterating the promise we make in the service of baptism, the promise we make as the people of God, loved by God, redeemed by Christ, and empowered by the Spirit for holy and loving life:

With God’s help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround *all God’s children* with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God and be found faithful in their service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be a true disciple who walks the way that leads to life.”

Love God. Love your neighbors. *All your neighbors*. Take this to heart, so the next time a 10-year-old girl asks you what your church is all about, you’re ready with the one main answer: “We love all people as God loves us.”

- Amen.

