



The Marks of a Methodist

Week 1: Grace

Brian Mattson - 07/12/2026

I know it often feels like we, as a church, are on our own little island in a sea of churches. The truth looks closer to an archipelago—a scattering of islands, grouped together by geography or identity. We, as a part of the United Methodist Church, are connected to all these other islands via our global denominational bonds. Bonds characterized by a shared history, theology, and mission. Those connections have ebbed and flowed with the changing tides of culture, geography, and theological differences. However, as a lifelong United Methodist, I can say that I am so pleased with the direction of this denomination. That wasn't always the case.

For many years there was a lot of internal dissension in our ranks. There were major differences in theology. There were differences in our understanding of humanity. These differences played out across vast geographical areas and even in our own city. Keep in mind we have churches in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, but those enormous cultural differences also played out between friends, family, and neighbors right here in Springfield. The latest denominational debate centered around human sexuality, mostly centered on who the church could marry and who was allowed to be ordained. Churches splintered. Conferences shrunk. The denomination schismed. It wasn't pretty.

In my opinion, our denomination—the United Methodist Church—came out (that's not a pun) on the other side of the debate with a healthier perspective on inclusion and autonomy. Our denomination is made up of humans, so we will never agree on everything, but a middle ground where churches and pastors who don't share my views are allowed some flexibility instead of rigidity is a healthier way forward.

Still, I believe we are moving in the right direction, and as Lori used to say, the church is always and forever in need of reformation. And I wonder if the debates we endured the past ten years are very similar to the debates around ordaining women clergy 70 years ago, or de-segregating the Methodist Church about ten years after that in 1968. That's not too long ago, some of you might even remember it.

It's human nature to want to put people or positions into boxes, to draw clear lines. I have that tendency as well. There's a great quote from Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber that says, **"Every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it,"** that is to say Jesus is always with and for all of humankind, even when that's hard to accept. Not that Jesus necessarily would agree with all stances or opinions, but that Jesus can and does change hearts through the Holy Spirit, and it's not for us to decide who is in or out; who is acceptable and who is beyond repair.

For the next five weeks, we are going to spend some time discussing what makes us unique and different as a denomination. We aren't a Presbyterian church, nor Lutheran, Episcopalian, or Baptist. We are orthodox in our beliefs, but we allow for Biblical interpretation and wider perspectives of traditional theology. Several times a year, we offer a class where we discuss our denominational differences and the history of the UMC. Some of you haven't taken the Next Steps Class, so consider these next weeks as a primer. We'll offer it again in the fall, so maybe you will be even more interested than you are now. Plus, if you come to the class you get a free lunch! So... Are you

ready? Let's dive in and have our hearts strangely warmed, which sounds weird, but after today, you'll be in on the joke.

We are going to fly through some history real quick. The Methodist Movement, what it became known as, started on the campus of Oxford in England in 1729. John and Charles Wesley were a part of a group labeled the Holy Club. These young Anglicans endeavored to take a life of faith seriously and methodically, which is where we get the name Methodists. It wasn't a nice name, others gave the group that label, but it stuck. It's true that they were methodical about how they practiced faith. It was very much theological and spiritual, but it was equal parts practical and experiential. This small group of students met to read scripture, pray, and discuss theology, but they also had set days for visiting the sick or imprisoned. They took their faith and did something with it, living it out in practical ways.

Later, John Wesley was recruited by the governor of the Georgia colony, James Oglethorpe, to lead a new parish in Savannah. On the journey across the Atlantic, James was introduced to members of the Moravian church, one of the oldest Protestant denominations. Their faith seemed personal, joyful, and spiritual—different from the stuffy, well-mannered Church of England. After two rather unsuccessful years in Georgia, the Wesleys were basically run out of town. Downtrodden and distressed, he returned to London and was mentored by a Moravian minister, and was encouraged to “preach faith until you have it.”

I'm sure this piece of advice seemed impossible to attain to Wesley. How do you gain something like faith? Is there a system to follow? How do we know when we have it, have enough of it? John Wesley was full of discipline and methods, and was well versed in how to tell other people what to do, but his faith lacked a personal touch. It was mostly head and little heart.

Then, one evening in May of 1738, John Wesley attended a Moravian service and something happened. Here's his journal entry about it:

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

I believe that John Wesley's Aldersgate Experience happened because he ran out of ways to trust himself. He had always relied on his brain to figure out the answer when the truth was he needed to trust God. I'll admit, that's easier said than done, but what John Wesley encountered, what has become a cornerstone of our denomination, was God's grace.

This new realization that God's grace was for everyone and *in* everyone changed Wesley's trajectory. Soon he was speaking and writing differently. He started preaching God's grace in the countryside to working-class miners. This clergyman who loved the high-church liturgy of the Anglican denomination found a new zeal in the lived liturgy of being in relationship with people and working out salvation within community. He developed small groups and societies to study, reflect, pray, and work for their neighborhoods. This movement inside of the Anglican church became a full fledged denomination as its adherents spread across the new United States of America. There have been many twists and turns, bumps and bruises along the way, but I'm glad to be associated with this movement today, and I'm excited for its future.

There's a plaque in London at the site of Wesley's Aldersgate Experience, where his heart was "strangely warmed," that reads: This experience of grace was the beginning of Methodism. That's not to say it was the first time Wesley experienced the presence of God or realized the goodness of God, but it was most definitely a moment that brought a new realization to the

power of God's love. Our Book of Discipline...(Ok, a quick field trip. If this is your first time hearing the term Book of Discipline, please know that I don't mean a book that we paddle people with when they do something wrong. It's simply a lengthy book outlining our doctrine, theology, and governing principles as a denomination.) As I was saying, our Book of Discipline defines grace this way: **The undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit.**

More than anything, John Wesley understood God's grace as the precursor to salvation. A gift from God to us, but as we believe God gives us free will, God allows us to respond to that grace, which is always readily available. Wesley vehemently denied the idea of predestination—that a certain select group of believers would inherit salvation, leaving others destined for destruction. No, Wesley understood God's grace to be “free in all and free for all.” He further explained his understanding of God's grace as having three movements: **Prevenient Grace, Justifying Grace, and Sanctifying Grace.** I find these three movements or expressions to be helpful explanations of such a broad concept.

First, there is Prevenient Grace or preventing grace, and what John Wesley means is the grace of God's that was there before we even knew about God. Present in all things and all people. Even while unknown to us, God is calling, beckoning, and embracing us. John Wesley used the metaphor of a house to help explain the three movements of grace, and Prevenient Grace was the front porch. It was the place to prepare to enter the house.

Next is Justifying Grace. This is when grace becomes recognizable. Something changes in our understanding of who God is and the love God has for us. It all becomes much more real. As we continue with Wesley's house metaphor, this is crossing the threshold of the front door and going inside. For Wesley, Justifying Grace was very much his Aldersgate Experience where his “heart was strangely warmed.” Like his eyes were seeing for the first time. His heart beating for the first time. Perhaps you've experienced something like this.

Maybe in your youth at church camp. Maybe it was something someone did for you, so unexpectedly, that changed your outlook. Maybe it happened when you held your child for the first time. Maybe it has been a slower progression, but now you live a new kind of life. However it happened, something changed within you.

The final movement is Sanctifying Grace. This is the grace that goes with us for the rest of our days in God's house, a place with many rooms as we dwell with God. I think the Book of Discipline's description of sanctifying grace—the grace that leads us into holiness—is perfect: *We hold that the wonder of God's acceptance and pardon do not end God's saving work, which continues to nurture our growth in grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor.* Sanctifying grace is our partner as we live new lives, set apart for God's purposes.

God's grace was all-encompassing to Wesley's theology. Jesus was the embodiment of God's grace, God's undeserved love. Wesley saw God's grace as the counterpoint to the doctrine of Original Sin—that is the idea that humankind is predisposed to sin and death through Adam's failure. We as United Methodists are still wrestling with the idea of "original sin." Many of John Wesley's thoughts on it sound somewhat harsh to our modern ears.

But what Wesley did do was give us an unwavering conviction of the relationship between human sin and God's grace. They are not co-equals. They are out of balance. Grace is so much more powerful than sin. It wins every time. Here's how Paul describes it in Romans 5 from The Message:

Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! One man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right. All

that passing laws against sin did was produce more lawbreakers. But sin didn't, and doesn't, have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace. When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down. All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that's the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life—a life that goes on and on and on, world without end.

- Romans 5:18-21 MSG

In Wesley's three expressions of grace, God is moving us. We are being transported, not towards death and destruction, but into newness of life and reconciliation. At Annual Conference every year, for those in the commissioning or ordination process, they are asked, what I thought was a weird question: Are you going on to perfection? *How strange*, I used to think. This question that John Wesley instituted hundreds of years ago seems out of date, at best. But as I've become more familiar with the UMC, I've realized I'm okay with it, as long as I reframe my understanding of perfection. It's not being perfect in our modern sense—never making mistakes and always being, well, perfect. It's about becoming whole. It's about maturing in faith, completely loving God and neighbor.

I don't expect to get there anytime soon, but the question remains for all of us. Are you going anywhere with your faith? Are you moving forward, perhaps into new and unexplored rooms in God's house? Or are you just sitting on the couch, happy to be inside? What does it look like for you to invite others in from the front porch? Can you open a window and call out to a neighbor? I don't know what it looks like for you, but I do know that God's grace is made more powerful when we *use* it instead of only talking about it. Give it a try. Maybe the way you share God's grace with others will cause hearts to be strangely warmed.