



Marks of a Methodist

Week 3: Vital Piety

Heather Blair - 07/26/2026

Good morning. We're in the middle of a sermon series called, "The Marks of a Methodist." In it, we're hitting the highlights of what it means to be a United Methodist in 2026. Our distinctive roots trace to the 18th century in the work and ministry of John and Charles Wesley. The first week we talked about the topic where the Wesleys would have had us start: grace. God's grace. The definition we work with is: The undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit. The loving ACTION of God in human existence.

Once we have been touched by that grace, we may start to wonder: who is this God loving me? How can I know God? Is what I've heard about God true? Because some of God's PR people down here are not doing the greatest job at making God seem appealing. What is my place in God's kingdom? How do I do life now that I am embracing this grace? Good questions, all. For many Christian movements the source for answering all these questions is: the Bible. Full stop. But it was not a full stop for John Wesley. He found more sources through which God speaks, even today. He described four—giving primacy to the Bible, but making real space for another three: reason, tradition, and experience. We call these collected sources The Wesleyan Quadrilateral. If you weren't here last week and want

to know more, you can find Brian's sermon on our website—including what all of that might have to do with Pink Floyd.

But for today, we're moving on. Because that's how the Wesleys rolled. They liked talking about theology and faith, but they were more interested in doing something with it.

One of the things I love about the Wesleys' story is that they came to their methods through trial and error. And, let me tell you, they made some ERR-ORS. And we still tell those stories. Because it's real. Getting to know God and learning how we have the possibility to be in light of God is a lifelong pursuit. We have to stay open. We have to be willing to try some things, maybe have them not work out, learn a little lesson and then try something else. That's the freedom of being centered in grace.

My own journey to United Methodism is one of trial and error. I didn't grow up in church, but was somehow confirmed in my hometown Methodist church when I was in sixth grade. And, I will sum up the experience by saying: it was NOT for me. So, I tried other churches, other denominations throughout my life. I went to seminary with one. And, honestly, I loved my time in seminary. I love studying theology. I was energized by having my brain become part of my faith. But, when I finished my Masters of Divinity and went to work with those folks, I found out that my brain wasn't quite so welcome. Questions were trouble-making. Disagreement was rebellion. I didn't survive there.

Eventually, I tried working with another denomination. My brain was completely welcome there, but my heart not so much. I think I have a somewhat serene demeanor. But I am also a person with BIG FEELINGS. Big feelings about God and God's people. I have copied these words from Thomas Merton into ten different journals because they resonate so strongly with my experience. Merton was a Catholic monk who lived in the early 20th century.

“Love sails me around the house...it gives me soft punches all the time in the center of my heart. Love is pushing me around the monastery, love is kicking me all around like a gong I tell you, love is the only thing that makes it possible for me to continue to tick.”

Love sails me around the world, I don't know how to describe my experience any better than that. But I worked in a denomination for a time where that sort of heart wasn't very welcome. It's messy. It seems to be always kicked around by love for the wrong kind of people.

One place didn't like my brain, the other didn't like my heart. It always felt to me like it wasn't okay to be a whole person. Squish this part, or silence that. I can make light of it now. But at the time, it was painful to feel like I didn't belong anywhere.

Until, somehow in the Fall of 2013 I was hired as an assistant pastor at... wait for it... the United Methodist Church in my hometown. The very one I had hated every second of Confirmation in asked me to come be a PASTOR there. Life is weird. The only thing weirder than the invitation was the part where I said yes. I started in October and that winter entered the licensing process. The first book I was assigned to read was this one right here: “Recapturing the Wesley's Vision” by Paul Chilcote. The introduction concludes with an excerpt from one of Charles Wesley's hymns:

**“Unite the pair so long disjoined,
Knowledge and vital piety;
Learning and holiness combined,
And truth and love let all men see
In these, when up to Thee we give,
Thine, wholly thine, to die and live.”**

There are some churchy words in there: “piety” and “holiness.” In other traditions those words have come to mean something about moral behavior—not doing or even associating with the naughty things. Being

good girls and boys. But, that's not so much the case for the Wesleys. Charles is using those words to reflect the actual *living* of the things we believe. *Vital* piety. Participating in the way God makes it possible for us to live. Here's John Wesley giving this idea some clarity in one of his sermons:

"What religion do I preach? The religion of love, the law of kindness brought to light by the gospel. What is this good for? To make all who receive it enjoy God and themselves. To make them, like God, lovers of all, contented in their lives."

So, Charles doesn't use "piety" or "holiness" to describe some morality code—he uses those words to describe moving through the world with love. You can tell because he's got three pairs there: knowledge AND vital piety. Learning AND holiness. Truth AND love. Three ways of saying the same thing. These pairings are the Methodist way of describing the essential components of practicing our faith. Last week we talked about knowledge/learning/truth. This week let's look at vital piety/holiness/love.

For John Wesley, the first thing love does is draw us into connection. First with God, and then with each other. He points to the metaphor of the grape vine that Jesus uses in John 15 (I'll read from The Message):

"I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples."

"I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love

one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father.

"But remember the root command: Love one another."

The way Jesus sees it, when we allow God to love us and when we begin to return that love, we become interconnected. Not just with God, but with everyone else who has become interconnected with God. We become one living organism. What holds us together is not the fibers of a grape vine, but love itself. Love carries life back and forth between us. Love is not a solo pursuit. How can it be? How can we love without someone to love? Wesley had tried a detached, top-down sort of life of faith, and it was an utter failure. It got him fired from a post in Georgia and shipped all the way back to England. They wanted nothing to do with his power-play ministry. So Wesley learned, tried again. Moving toward practices that were much more egalitarian, reciprocal. Connected.

The first thing love does is unite us with God, and in the very same motion it connects us to each other. It gives us a home.

What's next for Wesley? Well, he will call it evangelism. But, don't panic. Wesley doesn't mean heading out to the square with a sign reading "Repent or burn." For Wesley, for us, evangelism is more show than tell.

"More than anything else, the early Methodists were convinced that love cannot be coerced. Nothing proclaimed Christ more fully than a winsome life. No methods of evangelism were employed, therefore, that were antithetical to its end. If love is the end, then love, and especially not fear, must be the means."—Paul Chilcote

We are loved, we are made at home, as John says. That doesn't mean we won't experience hard things, but it means we can experience them surrounded by love. Cause for a winsome life. Inexplicable joy. Generous love. That shows itself to others in such a way as to be inviting. Love starts it, love mingles it, love is the end of it.

Paul says it this way in Philippians 1:

“So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.”

Friends, does that get a little something stirring in you? It does me. We are loved. We are connected, to God and to each other—and then best of all there's plenty of room for everyone. For all. We don't have to think through who is acceptable for the guest list. The guest list is already made and it says EVERYONE. So, we can just set about living a winsome life of love with everyone. Vital piety.

This vital piety, this life-giving love, connects us (creating the church). Sets us to connecting others (evangelism). And finally sends us out to be love in any way we can think of (mission). For Wesley, the central purpose of the church is mission. The church isn't called to live for itself, but for others. Here's how Paul Chilcote summarizes Wesley's perspective on our mission:

“The true vocation of every believer, and thus of the church as a whole people of God, is a summons to enter a particular revolutionary path of self-sacrificing love for the world. To be the church, from a Wesleyan point of view, is to accept Jesus’

**invitation to participate in a new age of peace with justice,
founded upon the reckless abandonment of power and self."**

Creating peace and justice with the reckless abandonment of power and self. There is a version of church in the US right now that is power hungry. Brian talked about it the first Sunday of this month, so I won't go on at length except to say: That is not us. We are not now and have never been interested in power over anyone. We are here for service, animated by love. We are here to be a part of restoring wholeness. Not forcing people to cut off pieces of themselves to be pleasing to our whims and tastes.

For some churches the main question to be answered is: "Am I saved?" Or maybe, "What must I do to be saved?"

That is not our main question. Back to Chilcote:

"The ultimate question is, for what purpose am I saved? For the Wesleys, the answer was clear. My neighbor is the goal of my redemption, just as the life, death and resurrection of Christ are oriented toward the salvation of all humans."

Or back to John 15:

"...remember the root command: Love one another."

For what purpose? Not for any other agenda than what we're made for. To love. God and one another. In ways winsome and practical. By attending to the hungry, thirsty, sick, broken, forgotten, ignored, marginalized, oppressed, abused, imprisoned, here without papers, grieving, lonely... not because they are to be pitied. Not in order to get jewels in some imaginary crown. But because "they" are "us." We are them. God loves us all. There is plenty to go around. We don't have to go out working for justice and peace and wholeness alone. We're not meant to. We're meant to do it together.

You got a little something stirring in your soul of some-ones you'd like to share some love with? Tell one of us. Invite us along on your revolutionary

path. There is so much love in this church... it sails us around the room. So, we've got it to share in places where it's lacking. Who do you know of that needs love in action? Where do you see spaces where you could bring some justice or peace if you just had a little support? The staff here isn't the church, right? WE are the church. All of us.

The process of deconstruction and reconstruction that so many of us have been through is very in our heads. It's about thoughts and information. New ways of thinking and seeing. And that is absolutely welcome here. Just don't forget that is only half of the equation. Knowledge AND vital piety. Vital. Alive. Life-giving. That life doesn't come so much from what happens in our heads. It comes from putting love into action. Love that connects us, invites others and then heads out on the mission of bringing wholeness to the whole world.

Fifteen years ago when I first read Charles Wesley's words about "uniting the pair so long disjointed, knowledge and vital piety," I had given up on finding a place where the whole of me could belong. But then his hymn might as well have said, "Hey Heather, we've got a spot for you right here." Maybe not as catchy—but that's how I heard it anyway. You can see here, I drew a big heart around the words and wrote, "Praise you Father, that I am finally home." And it has stayed true.

We were all made to think. We were all made to love. It takes knowledge and vital piety to make whole people. Hold tight to your spot on the vine with me, and then let's us together remember the root command: love one another.