

"CLAIMING OUR ROOTS, NO. II"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Three weeks from tomorrow evening, on Christmas Eve, the United Methodist Church in America will celebrate its 200th birthday. It will celebrate the anniversary of its founding which took place on December the 24th, 1784 in Baltimore, Maryland. In this year of our Bi-centennial, I've been encouraged by some of you in the Church to preach a sermon or two on our Methodist history and heritage.

Back on the first Sunday in November, I preached a sermon entitled, "Claiming Our Roots". I gave you a thumbnail sketch of a bit of Methodist history and also suggested to you the one central doctrine or theological under-pinning which had much to do with Methodism's early strength both here and in England. It was the Doctrine of Perfection. And today's sermon, something of a "post-script" to that sermon of a month ago might be called, "Claiming Our Roots, No. II".

DEVELOPMENT

I went back to that sermon of November the 4th to see how I ended it, thinking that the closing lines of the last paragraph or two might serve as a bit of a spring board for today's message.

I made the claim that Wesley, the founder of Methodism in England, was one of few theologians in the history of the Christian Church who took seriously the teaching of our Lord that "You must be perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect". He insisted that that is a possibility. It's a possibility for every human life. And I suggested that in a pessimistic age in which people had pretty well given up on their lives, that came as good news. Not only good news, but great news!

Now Wesley did not define perfection the way we're tempted to, as not making mistakes, as being right all the time. He tied it to the Great Commandment of loving God with all your heart, soul and mind, and loving your neighbor as yourself. And he said, "That's possible...that you can do it." And to be Christian by definition for John Wesley was to be always striving to do it. It was called naive, it was called heretical by some, it was called dangerous, it was called every other name in the book. But I tell you, it worked! And in the words of the hymn we just sung, written by Charles Wesley, yes - it "broke the power of cancelled sin, and set the prisoners free".

And so Methodism from 1784 on spread like prairie fire, especially here in America. The lay preachers and circuit riders went right along with the early settlers as they headed west and south, celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion...marrying, baptizing and burying. Down into the Carolinas, over into Kentucky, up into Ohio and Indiana...moving westward with the early pioneers. They didn't wait for the roads to be built, as did the Presbyterians. They didn't wait for the trains, as did the Episcopalians. They were right there, with the Baptists, some might say. And you see the results of this in the strength of the Church today, across America.

Wesley gave the new Church in America a charge. He gave it in the form of question and answer, which is the way he addressed the Methodist societies, like a catechism. He asked, "For what purpose is God calling up preachers in America?" And the answer to it was, "To spread scriptural holiness across the land and to reform the continent". And that became the agenda of the Methodist Church here in this land. in the years that followed.

Let's take a closer look at this here in these moments together.

SCRIPTURAL HOLINESS

First, scriptural holiness, which was just another word for Christian perfection. Camp meetings soon sprang up in America after the founding of the Methodist Church at the beginning of the 19th century. They were founded by a Presbyterian preacher, but they soon became something of a Methodist institution, and the camp meetings spread all along the frontier. Their purpose, of course, was to inspire people into the habits of holy living. And out of the camp meetings came the holiness movement, as it came to be known, and when the holiness movement came to excesses in the Methodist Church it divided the Church.

But those camp meetings were what led us in the direction of revivals and the chataqua movement. I remember as a child going to an outdoor "camp meeting" upstate at Riverside, Riparius, New York...where the Hudson River has its source, just a little stream in which you can wade and swim...which I did while listening to some great revival hymns being sung in the background. Chances are that some of you may have had a similar experience in your childhood days.

The Bishops in the Church exercised discipline to suppress it, to quash it, and Methodists who were caught up in that movement left by the hundreds of thousands, and formed other Churches - the Wesleyan Church, the Free Methodist Church and later the Nazarene Church. When they left they took this Doctrine of Perfection with them and it soon became the possession of other churches. So you don't hear it much in Methodist Churches any more, and I don't know if that's good or bad.

For some, holiness became a negative moralism. What Perry Miller said of Puritanism could also be said of many in that movement. He said that Puritanism "curdled into censoriousness". And that does happen. I don't know if it is good or bad that holiness as a doctrine is no longer emphasized, but I do know this. If we are looking for our roots, then they are to be found in that Doctrine of Perfection, and its insistence that to be Christian is to be in the process of becoming the person God wants you to be.

And if we are to recover our roots it will be in the form of something like that. Maybe not 19th Century holiness, but something like that. That is, it will be in serious, disciplined living, with the aim of shaping our lives after the image of Christ. It will mean that in order to follow Christ, in order to say "yes" to Christ, we will have to say "no" to some other things in the world.

REFORM THE CONTINENT

Scriptural holiness was the first charge. The second charge that Wesley gave the Church in America was to reform the continent.

And Methodists jumped into that task, right at the beginning, with the abolitionist movement, at the cost of splitting the Church. Methodism was "anti-slavery" from the beginning. Wesley called slavery "the vilest thing to ever see the sun", and his instruction to Methodists was that they were never to own slaves. That rule was adopted by the Christmas Conference of 1784 in Baltimore. The next year, however, it was eased so as to read that Methodists could not "traffic" in slaves.

Methodism's great strength in those days - even as today - lay in the southern states, and so for the next fifty years the Methodists wrestled with the issue of slavery. Blacks had always been in the Methodist Church.

Twenty percent of the Methodists in the southern states were black. Richard Allen, a free black man living in Philadelphia was a member of St. George's Church, and he was ordained by Francis Asbury in 1796 as a Methodist preacher. He left the denomination when St. George's Church constructed a balcony and he and the other black members were asked to sit in the balcony. He formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the AME Church, which is the largest black Church in America. And in 1826 black Methodists here in this city formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion. And after the Civil War southern Methodists formed the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church - the CME - and those are the three largest black denominations in America. They're all part of the Methodist family.

Slavery was debated in every General Conference until 1844 when Bishop Andrew, Bishop of Georgia, was brought to trial for owning slaves. He said he didn't own them, and said that his wife owned them. But that didn't make any difference. And with his trial the southern states left the denomination, sixteen years before the Civil War, and formed the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and we remained separated until 1939.

Our Church was a part of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North), and over the doors of our Church and under the cut glass sign there is a stone ribbon which reminds us of this which says, Park Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church. We covered it over in 1966 with the up-dated proper designation, Park Avenue Methodist Church. The trouble was that two years later we became the Park Avenue United Methodist Church, following a merger with the Evangelical United Brthren Church. Time to change the sign again.

ALSO After the Civil War the Methodists turned their reforming zeal to the temperance movement. Frances Willard, founder of the Temperance Movement, was a Methodist lay woman. She was also an ardent feminist who fought for woman's rights in the Church. She said that alcohol abuse is not just a personal problem. It's a social problem. It affects not only the individual, but also the families of individuals. And the reforming zeal of Methodists to create a better society led them to work in the temperance movement to try and legislate against the evils of alcoholism. You see, it came from that "perfectionist" impulse to reform the nation. Historically, Methodists were always "tee-totalers". That conservative impulse is a part of our 200 year history.

The Methodists then turned their attention to the problems of the poor in the cities, the victims of the industrial revolution. First, through special ministries such as that led by Edgar Helms in the city slums of Boston. He was pastor of the Morgan Memorial Church in the worst slums of Boston. To help poor people in his parish he gathered food and clothing and opened the doors of the Church to anyone who needed help. The people stormed in. When he saw the near riot that ensued, he saw that he was demeaning these people and turning them into beggars. And so he began to collect items such as furnishings and clothing and tools from the proper Bostonian homes and set up a factory in South Boston so the poor could earn a decent living. Thus Goodwill Industries was born.

And at the end of the last century there was a series of labor strikes. The Pullman Strike and later the US Steel Strike. The Methodist Bishops got involved in trying to settle those strikes, taking the side of labor in getting legislation through Congress that would end the 12 hour day and the 7 day week.

In the 19th Century there were three major reform movements in this country: abolition, prohibition and labor - and Methodists were at the bottom of every one. Out of that experience came the Methodist Social Creed at the beginning of this century, the first social creed of any Church. A list of principles that the Methodists said are necessary in order to have a just society. They were following Wesley, who said there is no such thing as solitary religion and there is no holiness apart from social holiness. And holy habits are undergirded by solid Bible study and prayer.

They were following that mandate to spread scriptural holiness across the land and to reform the continent. Lay men and lay women have been a part of that initiative. In my lifetime, I think of Branch Rickey, a Methodist laymen out of the Mt. Lebanon United Methodist Church of Pittsburg, introducing Jackie Robinson in 1946 to major league baseball and thus, breaking the color line in sports. I think, too, of Frank Mason North, here in New York City, and in the early years of this century, pastoring a Methodist Church not far from here, Jefferson Park Parish on East 112th Street and First Avenue, the author of, Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life, hymn number 204 in our red hymnal. Read it while you wait for the communion elements to be passed to you. Its inspiration came from the streets that you and I walk and know all too well.

So much is based on that Doctrine of Perfection, the idea that neither my life nor the world that I live in is the way God wants them to be. Not now, they're not. And if we are Christian and take our religion seriously, then we must be working to make them the way God wants them - or else what's it all about and what are Christians for?

As Charles Wesley - John's brother - wrote:

"A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify,
A neverdying soul to save, and fit it for the sky"

"To serve the present age, My calling to fulfill;
O may it all my powers engage to do my Master's will!"

If, in this year of our Bicentennial, if you want to find your roots as a Methodist, then start there. And if not here, where? And if not now, when?

PRAYER

And now may the spirit of Wesley be in our hearts, for we remember in these moments how he once said:

"Do all the good you can.
In all the ways you can.
To all the people you can.
At all the times you can.
As long as ever you can.

In the name and in the spirit of Christ, our Lord, we now pray. Amen