

January 28, 2018

What is a Methodist?
A Methodist Thanks God!
Luke 17:11-19

Opening words: There are eighty million Methodists in the world today. Each one can be traced back to John Wesley and his Aldersgate experience, when he was touched by the Holy Spirit, sanctified, and set apart by God. We are part of the largest group of Methodists, the United Methodist Church. There are twelve million United Methodists in the world. More than 6.9 million United Methodists live within the United States, clustered in approximately 35,000 congregations. However, many Methodists don't have a clear understanding of what it means to be a Methodist. Maybe that is your story?

Two weeks ago, I began a five-part sermon series called *What is a Methodist?* We are not going to be looking at our history, our administrative structure, our appointment process, our apportionment formula, or our rules. We are looking at our core values. Wesley, himself, identified them for us in a document he wrote called *The Character of a Methodist*. There are five. We have looked at the first one, *A Methodist Loves God!* Last week, we looked at the second one, *A Methodist Rejoices in God!* Today, we look at the third one, *A Methodist Thanks God*. Our Gospel reading for today is the one usually reserved for the latter part of November, Luke 17:11-19.

Luke 17:11-19 ¹¹ Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?" ¹⁸ Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

William A. Ward once said, "*Gratitude can transform common days into thanksgivings, turn routine jobs into joy, and change ordinary opportunities into blessings.*" I believe that quote is true, because I have experienced that in my life. If you find some truth in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the seventeenth chapter of Luke. The Master is traveling between the border of Samaria and Galilee. As he travels, he encounters various people. There are as many stories in the crowd as there are people. The story that

grabs Luke's attention is the story of the ten lepers. You have heard of leprosy in the past. Leprosy is a highly contagious skin disease caused by a certain bacteria. The disease still exists in our world today. In the United States, approximately 100 cases are reported annually. However, today it is treatable. In the days of Jesus, it was not. In Jesus' day victims of leprosy were forced to live in isolation, away from family and friends, in leper colonies. This is the story of the ten men in the scripture lesson. They are living with leprosy without any hope of a cure. Then, they hear the news that gives them hope: Jesus is coming! They have heard of his healing power, and they run toward Jesus. However, they can't invade his personal space. They are mandated by law to keep their distance. The best they can do is yell at Jesus as he passes. This is the good news: Jesus not only heard their desperate voices, but he also healed them. As was required by their law, Jesus instructs them to go to a priest for inspection. The priests had the authority to grant them permission to re-enter society. On that day, ten men were healed. However, this is the sad truth: only one man returned to Jesus to say, "Thank you." The other nine never returned; the other nine just resumed their lives. They never said, "Thank you!" The nine are the picture of ingratitude. Never underestimate the power of gratitude. How many truly grateful people do you know? How grateful are you? Remember, a Methodist is thankful. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** Can I ask you a question?

What have you received?

What do these five countries have in common?

- India
- China
- Nigeria
- Bangladesh
- Democratic Republic of Congo

This is the answer: poverty. According to a 2014 article in the Huffington Post, two-thirds of the world's poorest people live in these five countries, existing on \$1.25 a day or less. How does one exist on \$1.25 a day? There is no simple answer to poverty. There is no simple reason for poverty. I am thankful we don't live in poverty. I am thankful we were born in the United States of America. With all our problems, America is still a land of opportunity. If you cannot make it here, then you can't make it anywhere. Two-thirds of the world lives on \$1.25 a day. Any one of them would be glad to trade problems with you. This is the first question you must answer: What have you received? The answer is, a great deal. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) was one of the richest men in the world. When he sold Carnegie Steel to JP Morgan in 1901, he made a fast \$480 million. That is about \$13 billion today. He had money to give away, and he did. He once gave a distant relative, who he had never met, a one-million-dollar gift. At the same time, he gave \$365 million to various public charities. The relative cursed Carnegie because he received such a small gift. (How can anyone survive on a million dollars?) That is like receiving \$17 million in our world today. Maybe that is the story of our time? God has given us so

much, but we complain because we want more. If that is your story, then you are not a true Methodist. A true Methodist thanks God. If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** Did you know, the average per capita GDP in the United States, according to a November 2017 article in Fortune, is \$59,500? (That makes us the twelfth richest country in the world.) Let me state the obvious. God has been good to us! A Methodist thanks God. That leads me to the second question you must answer.

What have you given?

How many of you know the name Henrietta "Hetty" Green (1834-1916)? She was a stockbroking legend. Nicknamed "the Witch of Wall Street", she wore a long, flowing black dress. She must have loved it. It was her only piece of clothing. When she died in 1916, her net worth was \$200,000,000. Today, that comes out to be about \$4 billion. She was so wealthy, she bailed out New York City three times. However, despite all her money, she hated buying anything. She left her apartment and lived in her office. People hated going to her office because she turned off the heat to save money. For a long period of time, she ate only cold oatmeal because heating it cost too much. Money makes a wonderful servant, but it makes a horrible master.

How many here know the name W. Clement Stone (1902-2002)? He was an American businessman and philanthropist. He once said, *"If you are really thankful, what do you do? You share."* That is exactly what he did. He gave away over \$275 million in his lifetime. He gave to civic groups, mental health groups, Christian organizations, the Boys Club of America and the National Music Camp. He once said, *"All I want to do is change the world."* Can I ask you a question? Are you more like "Hetty" Green, cheapskate? Or are you more like W. Clement Stone, philanthropist? How have you changed the world?

This is question number two: What have you given? You don't have to give a million dollars away, but you must give something away. It is all part of being in a community. It is all part of being a Christian. It is all part of being a Methodist. If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** A Methodist thanks God. This is the third question you must answer:

What harm have you caused?

Like always, the news has not been pretty this week. Every time I looked, there was more bad news. On Tuesday, it was reported there was another school shooting. School shootings have become so common, they don't even get front page coverage anymore. This time, the shooting took place in Benton, Kentucky. Fourteen students were struck by gunfire; two of them were fatally wounded. One, a fifteen-year-old girl, died on the scene, and a fifteen-year-old boy was announced dead at the local hospital's trauma center. The shooter was a fifteen-year-old boy who was armed with a handgun. We live in sad, violent times.

On Wednesday, disgraced long-time USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar was sentenced to up to 175 years in prison for molesting young female gymnasts. Approximately 160 victims testified against him, including Olympic medalists. He is already serving a 60-year sentence in federal prison for child pornography. He had a hard time listening to all of his victims confronting him. How can you have so much and so little at the same time? We live in a sad world.

Then, there is the story of David and Louise Turpin. They are accused of keeping their thirteen children, ages 2 to 29, in filthy and fetid conditions, chaining some of them to their beds and using starvation as a weapon to control them. If convicted, each parent faces 94 years in prison to life, on more than two dozen charges, including torture, child abuse and imprisonment. I don't understand how this went on for so long undetected. We live in a sad world. Listen to what I am about to say.

The question is not, what harm have *they* caused. The third question you must answer is, what harm have *you* caused? How easy it is to find the fault in others. How difficult it is to find fault with ourselves. There is not a suicide bomber among us today, but we have all caused harm. The Bible says it clearly, we are all sinners. What harm have you caused? In each one of us are elements of the seven deadly sins. Do you remember them? 1. Pride, 2. Greed, 3. Lust, 4. Envy, 5. Gluttony, 6. Wrath, 7. Sloth (We are going to look at these seven deadly sins in a few weeks, during my Lenten sermon series.) Which one of those seven do you relate to the most? Our sins of commission are one thing. Our sins of omission are something else. What relief have you withheld? Let me ask you the question again. What harm have *you* caused? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** A Methodist thanks God!

How did you answer those three questions? What have *you* received? What have *you* given? What harm have *you* caused? This is the truth: those three questions are not original. They are based on three questions from the Japanese self-reflective practice called Naikan. There is a balance in these three questions. If you find that balance, then you will find yourself more grateful. Remember, a Methodist thanks God!

Let's end this message where it began. Jesus is traveling along the border between Samaria and Galilee. A great number of people see him because everyone wants to see the miracle worker. Ten are extremely desperate for a healing. They have leprosy, and Jesus is their only hope. They call out to Jesus, and Jesus hears their cries. The good news is, Jesus didn't just hear their cries, Jesus responds to their need. He heals each one. The bad news is, only one of the ten returns to Jesus to say, "Thank-you." That means only one of the ten was qualified to be a Methodist. A Methodist thanks God. You are a Methodist, so you must thank God too. Do you remember the words of William A. Ward? He once said, *"Gratitude can transform common days into thanksgivings, turn routine jobs into joy, and change ordinary opportunities into blessings."* And, all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**