

February 4, 2018

What is a Methodist?

A Methodist Prays Constantly!

Luke 11:1-4

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 for a special purpose. As United Methodists, we are part of the largest group of Methodists. There are twelve million United Methodists in the world. More than 6.9 million United Methodists live in 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?

Three 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 traits. We have looked at the first three: *A Methodist Loves God!*, *A Methodist Rejoices in God!* and *A Methodist Thanks God!* Next week, we look at the last one, number five, *A Methodist Loves Others!* Today, we look at number four: *A Methodist Prays Constantly!* Our Gospel reading for today is Luke 11:1-4.

Luke 11:1-4 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

² He said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation."

I love this story: A young man went into a drugstore to buy 3 boxes of chocolate: small, medium, and large. When the pharmacist asked him about the three boxes, he said, "Well, I'm going over to a new girlfriend's house for supper. Then, we're going out. If she only lets me hold her hand, then I'll give her the small box. If she lets me kiss her on the cheek, then I'll give her the medium box. But, if she really lets me smooch seriously, I'll give her the big box." He made his purchase and left. That evening as he sat down at dinner with his girlfriend's family, he asked if he could say the prayer before the meal. He began to pray, and he prayed an earnest, intense prayer that lasted for almost five minutes. When he finished, his girlfriend said, "You never told me you were such a religious person." He said, "And you never told me your dad was a pharmacist!" Let me state the obvious:

Americans believe in prayer. Consider these facts with me. According to the Gallup research group:

90% of Americans pray.

86% of Americans believe God exists (It is interesting that more people believe in prayer than believe there is a God.)

83% of Americans favor prayer at graduations.

70% of Americans believe Christian prayers should be spoken in schools.

75% of all praying Americans are Christian.

As Christians, we find prayer vital to our spiritual development. The great reformer Martin Luther once said, *"To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."* If you find prayer to be vital to your spiritual development, say, **"Amen!"** That leads us to this morning's Gospel lesson.

Today, we find ourselves in the eleventh chapter of Luke. Much has already happened. Luke has told us about the birth of Jesus. Luke has told us about the temptations of Jesus. In this section, Luke is telling us about the ministry of Jesus. Part of that ministry was the calling of the twelve disciples. Think about it for a moment. The disciples had a front row seat to the greatest life that was ever lived. They saw the miracles, they heard the lessons, they felt the power. They had complete access to Jesus, and they could ask him anything.

One day, one of the disciples asked Jesus about prayer. To be more exact, they wanted a unique prayer that aligned them with Jesus. In that time and in that place, each rabbi, or teacher, had their own prayer. If you heard the prayer, then you could identify their rabbi. John had taught his disciples a unique prayer, and the disciples of Jesus wanted the same. We call Jesus's unique prayer "The Lord's Prayer." It is really the disciple's prayer. Luke gives us his version of Jesus's prayer. Matthew has his version of Jesus's prayer in the sixth chapter. The differences in Luke's version of the prayer and Matthew's version of the prayer really don't matter today. The only thing that really matters today is that you remember prayer has been vital to our faith for a long time. Can I ask you a question? How much time do you spend in prayer? If you find prayer vital to your spiritual development, say, **"Amen!"** Today, I want to help you enhance your prayer life. That is important because you are a Methodist, and Methodists pray constantly. When you pray, never forget that God never changes!

God Never Changes!

May 27, 1988 was a pivotal day in my life. That was the day Kathryn and I got married. That means this year we will celebrate our thirtieth wedding anniversary. I don't want you to feel bad, but I still prefer her over you 😊. I think celebrating anniversaries is important. We spent our twenty-fifth anniversary in Boston. To be more exact, we spent our twenty-fifth anniversary in Fenway Park watching the Indians, (wearing Chief

Wahoo), playing the Red Sox. We are planning on spending our thirtieth anniversary in Arizona. To be more exact, we are going to be spending our thirtieth anniversary at the Grand Canyon. I haven't been to the Grand Canyon since I was a teenager. Kathryn has never been to the Grand Canyon.

The other night, I began reading about the Grand Canyon. The Grand Canyon is one of the seven natural wonders of the world, and the only one in the United States. According to the internet (so I know it is true), the Grand Canyon is 277 miles long, up to 18 miles wide, and is over a mile deep. Nearly two billion years of the Earth's geological history has been exposed by the Colorado River, which began its work five or six million years ago. Native Americans have lived on the cliffs and in the caves of the Grand Canyon for over 2,000 years. The first western European to see the Grand Canyon was Spain's Garcia Lopez de Cardenas in 1540. I find that to be amazing, but this is even more amazing: God is older than the Grand Canyon. Do you remember the Psalter lesson for today?

The ninetieth Psalm says, "From everlasting to everlasting thou art God." It is a Psalm about time. When you are young, you don't think time is a big deal, because you have so much time left. The young are always accused of wasting time. Age teaches you many things. One of the things that changes is the way we look at time. Time teaches us that time is limited. It is all part of being a human being. Like it or not, each one of us is preoccupied with time. Not so with God. He transcends time. That doesn't mean God's hair doesn't turn gray, or His joints aren't filled with arthritis. It means that God's very nature remains the same. God never changes. God is no different today than He was when the Grand Canyon was flat. God is no different today than on the day He created the world. If you think you can remember that God never changes, say, "**Amen!**" It is important to remember God's unchanging nature when you pray. It is also important to remember prayer changes things. Do you remember this story?

Prayer Changes Things!

Mother Theresa was summoned to the kitchen of the orphanage one day in Calcutta. She knew there was a problem. The head cook was upset because the order of food hadn't been delivered, and she was expecting three hundred for lunch in less than an hour. Everyone expected Mother Theresa to contact one of her sponsors for help. She didn't. Instead, she looked at the kitchen staff and said, "I suggest you go to the chapel and pray about this situation." They did, and ten minutes later a stranger showed up at the front door holding a clipboard. He asked for Mother Theresa. When she appeared, he looked at her and said, "The teachers have just gone on strike, so school has been canceled today. I have 7,000 extra lunches. Can you help us use them?" Isn't it great when God answers our prayers with a yes? Or maybe, you remember this story:

In its early days, Dallas Theological Seminary was in critical need of \$10,000 to keep the school going. During a prayer meeting, renowned Bible teacher Harry Ironside, a lecturer at the school, prayed, "Lord, you own the cattle on a thousand hills. Please sell

some of those cattle to help us meet this need." Shortly after the prayer meeting, a check for \$10,000 arrived at the school, sent days earlier by a friend who had no idea of the urgent need or of Ironside's prayer. The man simply said the money came from the sale of some of his cattle! Isn't it great when God answers our prayers with a yes?

You don't need those canned preaching stories to know it is true. The Gospels are filled with healing stories. Jesus got the blind to see. Jesus got the lame to walk. Jesus exorcised the demonic. Jesus brought a dead man, Lazarus, back to life. We love those stories. There is no doubt about it: Sometimes prayer changes situations. Sometimes, the situation does not change. We have all heard the stories of situations changing. Some of you have been involved in the stories. The only problem is, we wish the miraculous happened more often. If you wish the miraculous happened more often, say, "**Amen!**" However, that does not mean that change does not happen. The person who prays is always changed.

Prayer Always Changes Us!

In 2011, I wrote a six-part sermon series on prayer, *Can You Hear Me Now?* I reread that sermon series this week. I looked at prayer from various angles. I will be honest with you. I usually don't find anything I have written in the past to have any value. I like to think I am improving. However, that wasn't the case with that sermon series. I found those messages to have some merit. The theme that ran through the entire series was, "Prayer is cultivating a friendship with God."

One week I preached on the parable of the persistent widow, Luke 18:1-8. You remember the story. There was a widow in an unnamed town who was seeking justice from a godless judge. She is persistent in her request. In other words, she becomes a pest. In time, she wears the judge down and receives justice. It is a simple story to understand. Like all parables, it makes a single point. Jesus tells us that a one-time prayer about a certain situation isn't good enough. Like the widow, we need to be persistent. We need to keep going back to God with our request. The reason is simple. Change always occurs. Sometimes prayer changes the situation. However, prayer always changes the one who is praying. There is no way you can spend time with God and not change. Our exposure to God changes us! Can I ask you a question? How much time to you spend with God? How much time do you spend in prayer? Remember, a Methodist prays constantly. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" We see the influence others have on a person all the time.

His name is Tyler Hewlett. You may remember his name, if you are an Austintown Fitch football fan. He was an exceptional high school football player. He grabbed the attention of college football scouts and was offered a full scholarship to Youngstown State University. Getting a free college education is valuable. Ask any former college student who is paying off their student loans. Tyler's future seemed bright, until an event that took place in January of 2017. Hewlett and three others broke into an Austintown drug dealer's apartment and demanded "weed and money" at gunpoint.

Everything went wrong. Instead of playing college football, Hewlett, and the other three, are facing a four-year prison sentence. At his sentencing, Judge Lou A. D'Apolito of the Mahoning County Common Pleas Court quoted Youngstown State University President Jim Tressell. He said, *"Show me your friends and I will show you your future."* That is exactly what happened. Tyler's friends influenced him, and now his future is questionable. It isn't just true of Tyler Hewlett. It is true of us. It is true of you. The people we spend our time with do influence us. Let me ask you the question again.

How much time do you spend with God? How much time do you spend in prayer? Remember, a Methodist prays constantly, and you are a Methodist. Prayer is forging a friendship with God. There is no doubt about it - God never changes. There is no doubt about it - prayer changes things. Sometimes prayer changes situations. However, prayer always changes the one who prays. Do you remember the words of Martin Luther? He once said, *"To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**