

Picnic Worship and Music Celebration
Hebrews 10:22-26
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Thirteenth Sunday in Pentecost
Woodbury UMC
August 28, 2022

How wonderful it is to welcome you all to this worship gathering. I look around, and I realize: This is the most Methodist thing we could ever do!

Look at what we are doing today. Our founder John was famous for preaching outdoors, going so far as to preach to the coal miners. We have gathered outdoors. Our founder Charles wrote the hymns, scads of them, and when describing what it is that we believe, we like to say that we sing our theology. Well, we are singing today, but I don't believe any of these hymns were written by Charles Wesley. But that's ok, because the tradition is a living one. We adapt. If we are a people that sing our theology, then our theology is awfully fun, kinetic, and explicitly involves children. And as for people who don't want to sing in our worship, well, if they can do all the movements, then they are participating in their own way. We make a joyful noise to our Lord and Savior in all manner of ways, because we do all things in the name of Jesus. This includes singing, and dancing, and laughing, and clapping of hands, and stomping of feet, and keeping the beat on tables.

We are worshipping while there is plenty of food, waiting patiently for whenever we are ready for it. I think we love gathering with food so much because it is a tangible and practical way to care for one another, with that being one of the things Christians do, we care for one another. I don't remember the last time I heard anyone use the word "potluck" that wasn't in reference to a church sponsored event. If we are going to be known for everyone bringing something so

that everyone has enough, all caring for one another, I am very proud to be a part of that tradition.

We are gathered together, yet members of two entirely different United Methodist congregations. That may be the most Methodist thing of all.

One of the elements of our tradition that I love is the concept of social holiness. It sounds like social justice, but they are not the same thing. Social holiness — the idea that my salvation is tied up in yours. That we are to care for one another in our faith journeys, and in growing maturity in Christ. That came out famously in John Wesley's question: How goes it with your soul?

I'm going to take a risk.

Look at someone near you, preferably someone you don't know well, and ask them. How goes it with your soul? I know we love to talk, so please keep it to a sentence or two. And then switch, let them ask you, how goes it with your soul? Listen to what they say. In a little while, when we come together in prayer, please pray for one another, in whatever way is appropriate to what they told you. Be specific, if you can.

How was that?

THAT is social holiness in action.

Earlier I mentioned teaching Methodist 101 and our social principles, the latter found in the *Book of Discipline*. Have any of you looked through the BOD? Great — that's more than I would have thought. Near the front of the *Book of Discipline*, there is something called a Historic Statement. It gives a history of the Methodist

movement from its inception to the most recent revision. It is remarkable for many reasons and absolutely worth your time.

The reason I mention it today is that throughout our history, things have been terrible, difficult, problematic. The Methodist movement was doing well in America, but then a war broke out. That ended up creating the American Methodist Church. From about the time John Wesley died, there have been arguments over how to be a Methodist, initially about if you could own slaves, or ordain women, and it just kept going from there. We split up over that slavery question for a very long time. John Wesley licensed Sarah Crosby to preach in 1761, yet women didn't get full clergy rights until 1956, and for a while there, women had NO rights. Our overt racism ended up inspiring three new Methodist denominations led by Black Americans — AME, AMEZ, and CME. Our actions were not good — but what we intended for bad, God used for good.

And in the meantime, the church did ministry. We spread like wildfire, and for a while there we were the largest denomination in the US. The 1960s were a time of great turmoil, even a time of war and young men being drafted and sent to Viet Nam. Rev MLK was assassinated in early 1968, and in mid 1968, the United Methodist Church was born from the combining of predecessor Methodist denominations.

During all these times of turmoil, God was up to something. All of these pivotal moments are times when Methodism either took a step it wouldn't have done otherwise, or changed form into something more suitable for the challenges of the day.

And now? Methodism is in turmoil!

I love looking at the two of these congregations getting together. Because the country is awash with conflict, and here we are, caring for and about each other.

The UMC is going through changes, The NYAC is going through changes. It may well be that the Holy Spirit is up to something. It may well be that we will end up with a new Methodist Church, able to do things we've needed to do but couldn't without coming to a moment of crisis.

Our two congregations have had challenges. Might they allow us to try something new? If things are great, you don't want anything new — stay the course! But if there are challenges, then rise to the occasion! Amen!