

Knowledge and Vital Piety

Matthew 25:31-46

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Perhaps you didn't know this, but Methodists kind of get made fun of a little bit in ecumenical circles. When sitting around chatting with folks from other Protestant denominations – not to mention Catholics or Orthodox Christians – the others might laugh a little at the Methodist (in a friendly way, of course), accusing us of being kind of wishy-washy. Ambiguous. Vague in our beliefs. And while it's true that United Methodists – and Wesleyans throughout history – don't have a system of specific doctrinal statements that each adherent must agree to... and while it's true that United Methodists are a very diverse lot, both within congregations and across the denomination... we are not wishy-washy or ambiguous or vague. We have conversations when we disagree with each other, so sometimes we change our positions, but I think that's faithfulness, not ambiguity. And I must say, after a fair amount of research on the subject, that I could not be more proud to be a United Methodist Christian.

Many of the distinctive elements of our tradition come from John Wesley himself – the man who is credited as starting in the 1700's what became the Methodist church. We emphasize grace in our theology, for example, rather than judgment. Perhaps a misinterpretation of this priority leads others to think we are wishy-washy and are open to people believing just whatever makes them happy, but this is a *mis*interpretation, indeed. We also have a focus on community – not only our congregational community and the community we serve, but the community of the connected church around the world, all in conversation with one another, all voices being equal, for better or for worse.

And perhaps the thing that keeps me rooted in Methodism most of all is the importance of what John Wesley called “knowledge and vital piety.” We believe that faith must be both understood and acted, believed and lived. The two must go hand in hand. In fact, our *Book of Discipline*, another part of Methodism that gets a bit of a bad rap, says clearly that the heart of Christian ministry is an expression of both “the mind and mission of Christ.” It's not enough to develop the mind of Christ without the mission – nor to have the mission without the mind. And this is a tougher balance to strike than it sounds: so many of us Christians – United Methodists included – are *either* super-focused on our personal relationships with Christ and our own spiritual growth and development *or* on missions of justice, mercy, and compassion. Neither set is better than the other, because both are grossly lacking.

This must have been an issue in Wesley's day, as well, as he was clear about finding that balance: progressing toward spiritual holiness through spiritual disciplines and study; *and* the actual practice of love, justice, peace, mercy, and reconciliation in the world, exemplified in Jesus' life on earth. And of course, as Methodists, we believe all of this – the spiritual and the physical, the inward and the outward, the mind and the body, the heart and the hands – takes place in community, not in isolation.

So there's a piece of me that reads this text from Matthew's gospel – the separation of the sheep and the goats based on how people respond to ‘the least of these’ – and wants to add, “And having some spiritual basis for this work is important, too, right?” I want to shout at the author as he's walking away, making sure that the balance of mission and belief was *assumed* since it wasn't mentioned explicitly. And since the gospel writer can't exactly answer my question now, and seems

throughout the book to be quite focused on making sure we understand the importance of *doing* faith and not just having it, we use our Wesleyan heritage to round out the story.

There's a lot for us to take from today's gospel text. It's biting, for one. It gives us a little pain to hear it – any time we read the words “eternal punishment,” we're bound to wince a little, whether it's the separation of the wheat and the chaff, the good seed and bad, the wise maidens and the foolish, or here, the sheep and the goats. So when I start reading, I inevitably check out a bit to make a list in my head: I've visited a sick person, I've given food to a hungry person, I've clothed a naked person at least in a roundabout indirect way... I start making sure I've fulfilled all the requirements, because I want to be in the right group. I want to be a sheep, not a goat.

But if we read the story more closely, perhaps the most amazing thing is that both groups are surprised when they hear the verdict handed down to them: neither the sheep nor the goats know what they've done. God may know if we've met the requirements or not – if we've been both believing and living the faith – but the sheep and the goats both ask the same question: “When did we see you?”

It's complicated, you see, this life of faith. It's not a scavenger hunt that's over when you find all the right people to serve or answer all the questions correctly. And the “right thing” to do or to not do is not always clear-cut. There's no detailed prescription, no exact routine to follow to ensure that we end up on the right team, because *doing* and *believing* have to go together, and that's not something we can plan out in neat weekly segments for the rest of our lives. At the end, we'll all ask that same question: “When did we see you?” whether we are defending lives that we thought were actually pretty holy or are surprised by the grace offered in response to our meager efforts.

So what are we to do, if there's no formula to figure out, no way to assure that we've fulfilled all the requirements? We might be tempted to give up, but I hope that won't be our final answer. And the only other thing I can come up with – if there's no prescription for righteousness – is to follow the One who *is* Righteousness. It's to follow Jesus. It's to ask the age-old question, “What would Jesus do?” and to pray for an answer that's intelligible. It's to daily give our lives up to God's will, no matter where that might take us.

And that's what this covenant service is about: giving ourselves up to God's will, no matter where that might take us.

This, too, is a beautiful gift from our Wesleyan tradition. The first covenant service led by John Wesley was in 1755. He directed these services on a variety of occasions, but by the end of his life, they were almost always on New Year's Day or a Sunday at the beginning of the year. He required tickets for the services, as he didn't want people to come unprepared: he held instructional sessions beforehand which participants were required to attend. And the services themselves usually lasted *several* hours. He read long portions of instruction on living a covenant life with God, prayed a very similar prayer to the one we'll pray together in a few minutes, and celebrated communion, as we will do, as well.

Wesley wanted to remind all participants that the covenant is two-sided: on one side is God's promise that all will be fulfilled through Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our faith. It's not just a promise we make to God – but one God makes to us, that we see lived out in the goodness and grace in our lives. Our part is to promise to give up living for ourselves and live for God, striving in all things to serve God's purposes. For Wesley's congregations this was a time of self-examination and repentance as well as looking forward and resolving to live in a new way. Acknowledging our short-fallings in both faith and practice helps us to give ourselves fully to God.

So we approach this prayer today with solemnity and self-examination as well as excitement about what is to come. We already know that God is faithful, no matter what, and that while we may not always understand what God is up to, we can depend on God's grace through thick and thin; and we know that we don't make this covenant alone – we do it in the midst of community, where we can support one another, hold one another accountable, encourage and challenge each other, and celebrate with each other.

But it's important that we also approach this prayer with a great deal of sincerity and honesty. It's not an easy prayer to pray. It says, "I will go wherever you lead me, God – I am wholly yours. I will be at the top, I will be at the bottom. I will be rich, I will be poor. I will be busy and hard at work, or I will step aside. I might even suffer, but so be it, because I am yours." And I can't think of a more worthwhile prayer to pray at the beginning of a new year. It's so easy for us to make resolutions, to make plans, to set our own agenda and destiny – and this prayer is the opposite of all that. It says, "I covenant to be yours, God, because you have already promised to be mine. I will go wherever you lead."

I will offer some time for reflection before we pray together – but even then if you don't feel like you can make this covenant with authenticity, then I'd encourage you just to take this little card home with you and pray for the strength to give yourself in covenant to God. Pray that God might take your life *from* you until you have the courage to give it away.

Knowledge and vital piety. We are called to both in this life of faith, but we can't even begin to understand what that looks like in the day to day – so the best we can offer is a covenant to follow the Righteous One wherever He may lead. This is our call. May it also be our prayer.

Amen.

A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

*Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.*

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

*I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.*

And now, O Glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.

*And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.*

Amen.