

We are United Methodists

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 7, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage

Ephesians 2:19-22(NRSV)

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Today, we gather to consecrate the new sanctuary of St. Andrew. It is a time to reflect upon what it means to be the church and to be United Methodists.

The Church, the Body of Christ

In today's passage from the letter to the Ephesians,¹ the "household of God" is the church ~ not buildings, not even newly consecrated sanctuaries. Rather, in Paul's rich imagery, all those who have faith in Jesus Christ are the church, which is built on the work and words of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of it all. When we rise each week to recite the Apostles Creed and affirm our belief in "one holy catholic² church," we mean the universal church, the body of Christ, the household of God – to which *all* Christians, *all* those who have faith in Jesus Christ, belong.

To hear the power in Paul's words, we need to remember that the Temple in Jerusalem was understood by Jews to be God's dwelling place with them. God's presence, his Spirit,³ had dwelt in the Temple, but had left because of his people's unfaithfulness to the covenant (see Ezekiel 10). But now, Paul writes, it is the people of God themselves who are joined together in Christ – a new creation, a new humanity ~ growing into a holy temple, the temple to which God's Spirit has returned. What a remarkable claim we make, that God's very presence dwells in us, the church ~ the people of God.

Denominations

I used to be troubled by all the denominations that make up the body of Christ, but I am no longer. In his various letters to churches, Paul often talks about the diversity among God's people. Some of us are given gifts of caring

The United Methodist Church

Methodism began as a movement within the Church of England led by John Wesley and his brother, Charles. After the Revolution, American Methodists formally separated themselves from the Church of England and established the Methodist Episcopal Church. Like so much of America, the Methodist Episcopal Church was torn apart over slavery and it was not until 1939 that several large "wings" of Methodism came back together as The Methodist Church. In 1968, The Methodist Church united with some of its "Wesleyan cousins," the United Evangelical Brethren, to create the United Methodist Church.

Today, the UMC has about 8.3 million members in the U.S. and another 1.5 million in Europe, Africa, and the Philippines. In the U.S., the UMC is divided into five "jurisdictions" which are further divided into conferences and districts. St. Andrew is part of the Dallas-Northeast District, which is part of the North Texas Conference, which is part of the South Central Jurisdiction. We Methodists are an organized (methodical?) lot!

Of all the congregations, organizations, and leaders that make up the UMC, *only* the General Conference can speak on behalf of the UMC. The General Conference is a legislative assembly of clergy and lay people (50/50!) that meets every four years. The next General Conference will meet in Pittsburgh in late April 2004.

¹The May 4, 2003, Background Study dealt with this passage at some length and also provides some background on the Letter to the Ephesians. For example, Paul may not have actually penned this letter. Even so, it is appropriate (and easier!) to refer to him as the author. All the Sermon Background Studies (there are more than 50!) can be found at www.standrewccl.org.

²The word "catholic" does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church, but simply means "universal."

³See Isaiah 63:9-14. In this crucial passage, God's presence with his people is equated with God's Holy Spirit.

or leadership. Others are gifted teachers or leaders. None of these gifts are superior to the others; all are needed in God's household (see 1 Cor 12:4-31 for example). God's family is strengthened, not weakened, by the diversity of these individual gifts. I've come to see denominations in much the same way. Christ's church is strengthened by the Roman Catholic emphasis on tradition and the Baptist commitment to evangelism. All Christians can learn a lot about the reality and power of the Holy Spirit from the Pentecostals and the Eastern Orthodox. The Presbyterians and Reformed remind us all of the importance of the Christian mind. Within this diversity, we seek unity in the essentials of our Christian proclamation while respecting, and using, our differences. It is in the seeking after unity that we United Methodists make our own distinctive contributions.⁴

"The Middle Way"

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was born the son of an Anglican⁵ minister and died as an Anglican minister himself. Methodism was birthed in the Church of England. When the storms of the Protestant reformation swept across Europe, the English struggled to reconcile two polarized groups. On the one hand, there were those who wanted to stay part of the Roman Catholic church. On the other hand, there were groups like the Puritans who wanted to restore what they referred to as "primitive Christianity." The leaders of the Church of England sought to find a "middle way." This seeking after the center underlies the Anglican and the United Methodist churches to this day.

Head . . . Heart . . . Hands

John Wesley's solidarity with the poor had always distinguished his ministry and threatened his reputation among the "respectable" folks. One of Wesley's regrets in his old age was that he himself had become "respectable" among the upper circles of London society.

But John knew that we are called to serve – to feed, to clothe, and to care (see Matt. 25:31-46). If that means we are viewed as odd or disreputable by the world, then so be it. Christianity is not just about what we believe or what we feel, but also what we do – the head, the heart, and the hands.

Wesley's commitment to bring the Good News and a warm meal to society's outcasts still permeates the UMC. We remain committed to social justice. We understand that we are not just to wait for the full realization of God's kingdom; we are to work toward it – every day and in every way and for all persons.

I couldn't count how many "mixed" marriages I've met in Methodist churches. You know what I mean – one spouse raised Roman Catholic and the other Southern Baptist! It seems that Methodist churches have enough liturgy and tradition to speak to the Catholic but enough revivalism to speak to the Baptist. This commitment to the "middle way," or as Scott Jones puts it, "the extreme center,"⁶ is reflected in our theology as well as in our practices. United Methodists affirm that the Bible is the "primary criterion of Christian doctrine," but we remember that our traditions, our intellect, and our experience all help to shape our understanding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We try hard to avoid simplistic "bumper-stick" interpretations and passing fads. We are committed to unity in the essentials of our faith, but remember that there is much that Christians can disagree about. As Wesley put it, "we think and let think."

A Holy Life

Another Methodist distinctive is our commitment to seeking after holiness, after Christlikeness. We strive to be ever truer disciples of Jesus. We refuse to dismiss the Sermon on the Mount as an impossible ideal. We understand that God's warming of our hearts, by his grace, urges us forward to a life lived in God's way, a life centered on the love of God and neighbor. We seek total commitment to the heart of God. We seek (and are willing to work towards!) the habits of goodness that spring from the holy heart.

⁴If you would like an introduction to Methodism, William Willimon's brief book, *Why I am a United Methodist*, is an excellent place to start.

⁵The worldwide Anglican Communion consists of the Church of England and all its descendents. In the U.S., the Episcopal Church is part of the Anglican Communion. Methodists share in the Anglican tradition.

⁶*The Extreme Center* is the title of a recent book on Wesleyan theology by Scott Jones, a professor at SMU's Perkins Seminary.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p>Day 1 1 Peter 2:1-12 The church is a chosen race” & “a holy nation” called to faith and growth and “honorable deeds.”</p> | <p>Day 2 Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats.</p> |
| <p>Day 3 1 Corinthians 12:4-31 The variety of gifts given to the church.</p> | <p>Day 4 James 2:14-26 The unity of faith and works – we cannot pull them apart!</p> |
| <p>Day 5 Ephesians 2:11-22 The larger passage from which this week’s scripture is taken. Paul is appealing for unity among Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the church.</p> | <p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p> |

Sermon Notes

Bible Academy registration is now available on-line!

We already have record enrollment. Please Register Now!!

Bible Academy classes begin the week of September 15. You can pick up information about the classes and a registration form at the information counter in the Narthex.

To register and for info go to www.standrewccl.org or www.standrewumc.org

Scott Engle's 9:30 class is meeting in

Wesley Hall (the "old sanctuary")!!

This new class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The Bible is largely a book of stories, some small and some large. Many of these stories tell of people's journeys toward and with God. Ruth leaves her homeland and her people to stay at Naomi's side and to worship Naomi's God. Paul, once a fervent persecutor of Christians, comes to faith in Jesus Christ and spends decades building the church throughout the Mediterranean.

We are all on journeys of our own. Blessedly, we are not on our journeys alone, but in the company of others who are seeking after God and lives of true discipleship. With the consecration of our new sanctuary, this week is a good time to reflect upon and to discuss our own stories.

- How did you come to faith in Jesus Christ? Has it been a lifelong process for you or can you identify a moment or a period in your life when you were consciously changed?
- Why are you a United Methodist? What attracted you to United Methodism? What disturbs you about Methodism?
- Why are you at St. Andrew? Did you choose St. Andrew from among the many UMC churches in our area or did St. Andrew bring you to Methodism?