Hi,

Happy Monday. I hope you weathered last evening’s storms well. Here are today’s updates:

* My 3pm Monday Matthew class and my noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet this week on [my ministry Facebook Page: “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour)
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

Today, we are going to begin exploring the reasons why we are Methodists. It is tempting to plunge right into the history, beliefs, and practices of the United Methodist Church, but that wouldn’t really answer the “why” question. Each of us has a story to tell about how we made our way to the United Methodist Church and to St. Andrew. Some of us have been Methodists our entire lives, others of us are new to the United Methodist denomination in the family of believers.

I married into the UMC many decades ago. Though Episcopalian growing up, I never gave the change much thought. Methodism seemed comfortable enough and I soon found myself teaching Sunday School and was even invited to preach a few times, as Methodism has a long tradition of lay preachers.

But still, I couldn’t have said that Methodism or the UMC was really a heart-felt, thought-out choice from among all the Christian denominations. There is much variety of tradition, expression, theology, and practice in the body of Christ, from the Spirit-filled experiences of the Pentecostals to the deep and beautiful traditions of the Orthodox. So far as I was concerned, the UMC and its Wesleyan heritage was a perfectly fine place for me to live out my faith, but that was about as far as it went.

But since coming to St. Andrew, I have been blessed to teach and preach regularly. And I’ve found that my appreciation of and commitment to United Methodist theology, traditions, and practices have grown ever deeper. Indeed, I can now say that I am not only a Christian on purpose, but I am also a United Methodist Christian by meaningful and informed choice. Why? Because God is love.

***John 4:16-21 (NRSV)***

**God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.**

***Ephesians 2:1-10 (NRSV)***

**You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.**

*Describing God*

Suppose someone came up to you and asked you to tell them about God, to describe God to them. Where would you begin? With an adjective? A story perhaps? What words would sum up the essential characteristics of God?

Pause before you answer, for you’ll find yourself on one path or another. For example, you might begin with the simple and very true statement, “God is great.” You would probably soon find yourself talking about God’s creation of the cosmos and his control of it. But if Jesus is the *full* revelation of God, then how does Jesus’ incarnation reveal to us God’s greatness? You probably don’t need the baby Jesus to know that God is great. After all, God’s greatness is a key theme shared by all the monotheistic religions.

Nonetheless, John, in his letter, takes us closer to God’s essence with the simple statement, “God is love.” This is a statement about God that I don’t think you could ever really know without the incarnation, from the crib to the cross.

Jesus, fully human and fully divine, reveals to us that God is inherently relational, one God existing as three persons, each of whom is fully and completely God though none are all of God. The three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are not simply three parts of a whole. Each *is* the whole though not all of it. The truth is that we lack the words to describe what our minds cannot fully comprehend.

Nonetheless, we proclaim that there is one God consisting of three persons who have always been, are now, and always shall be a loving community of three, the trinity. This truth about God makes John’s statement, “God is love,” not mere sentiment, but a concrete statement of God’s being, a God consisting of love – both lover and beloved in one God. Indeed, it is from God’s love that we learn the true meaning of love. As John writes: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16).

This is where John Wesley’s personal theology and, hence, United Methodist beliefs begin: “God is love.” In the lyrics of Charles Wesley, John’s brother: “Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down.”

The Wesley brothers understood that it is love and grace that define God. Grace is simply love in action. The cross, the sacrifice and faithfulness it embodied, takes us to the heart, the essence, of God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (from 2:4-8).

*Why?*

Years ago I came across the book, *Why I Am a United Methodist*, written by UMC Bishop William Willimon when he was the chaplain at Duke Seminary. His own reflections on the Methodism have helped me to be a Methodist “on purpose.” Willimon wrote:

“Both Charles and John felt that experience of the grace of God was at the center of Christian existence. No one preached grace better than John; no one sang about grace better than Charles. . . Admittedly, our Wesleyan emphasis on love and grace can be perverted into a kind of mushy, all-affirming inclusiveness, open to everything and rejecting nothing. This is certainly not true of Wesley and is not true of us United Methodists at our best.”

Yes! If you want to come to know God, the starting place is not God’s power or rule, it is God’s love. That “God is love,” is the foundational knowledge of God embodied in Jesus Christ and the starting place in Wesleyan theology.

A bit more: *Love? -- Eros, Phileo, and Agape*

If we really want to grasp the biblical perspective of love, we need to begin with the Greek word choices made by the NT writers. They had three words from which to choose.

*Eros* is a Greek word that has been taken directly into English. For the ancient Greeks, *eros* was the passionate love that desired the other for oneself. Often equated with sexual lust and fulfillment, the basic idea is that of erotic intoxication or ecstasy. *Eros* is never used by the NT writers. Paul could have used this word in his discussions of love and marriage, but he did not. This choice begins to point us in the biblical direction. Love is never about the fulfillment of our own desires, regardless of how powerful or wonderful the experience might be.

*Phileo* (verb) is a Greek word that is a little more familiar than you might think. After all, Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love. *Phileo* carries the sense of relatedness, specifically, to treat someone as if they were one of your own people. For example, we sometimes treat someone as if they were a member of our family -- that would be *philia* (the noun form). The NT writers use *phileo* a few times, but very infrequently. There is little theological significance to its occasional use (only about twenty times). *Phileo* is often used synonymously with *agape*, the NT word for love.

*Agape* is used about 250 times by the NT writers. Just as significant, when Greek-speaking Jews translated the Hebrew OT into Greek, they almost exclusively used *agape*. Why did they choose this word?

*Agape* was used very little by Greek writers in the ancient world. It was a weak word, lacking the power of *eros* and the warmth of *phileo*. Perhaps the best way to describe *agape* was “colorless.” It just didn’t have a lot of meaning – which made it perfect for the Biblical authors! No Greek word really meant what they wanted to say.

Because *agape* was a colorless word, its meaning to the original readers came solely from its context. The biblical translators and authors knew that the scriptural meaning of love, God’s meaning, was far different from what the world meant by love. If they used *eros* or *phileo*, readers would bring to Scripture many misconceptions. But by using *agape*, this colorless word, Paul, Matthew, John, and the rest could shape the word’s meaning to God’s meaning for it, a meaning which is grounded in sacrificing for others.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott