

Message: Ministry With*

Are you a Methodist? What does that mean to you? Is being a Methodist part of your identity? Let me offer you a real life story of a man who “could not be anything but a Methodist.”¹

“Richard Allen was an amazing man. He was born as a slave on February 14, 1760. At the age of seventeen, he was converted by the preaching of a man named Freeborn Garrettson and joined the Methodist Society (that’s what they called the local groups back then). He became Rev. Allen when he was licensed to preach at the age of twenty-two. Rev. Allen was one of two black preachers at the organizing conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784. Soon afterward, he became a member of the Old St. George’s Methodist Society in Philadelphia. One day in 1794, while praying at church, he and a few other black colleagues were literally pulled from their knees by a white official of the Society. They were treated shamefully that day.

That incident caused Rev. Allen and his friends to leave St. George’s and found the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church.

Although some white Methodists cruelly mistreated him, Richard Allen later wrote, ‘I feel thankful that I ever heard a Methodist preach. We are beholden to the Methodists, under God, for the light of the Gospel we enjoy.’ He was later asked to be the pastor of a non-Methodist African Church in Philadelphia. He offered the following statement as his reason for refusing the position, ‘I told them I could not accept their offer, as I was a Methodist ... I informed them that I could not be anything else but a Methodist.’”²

What if we said we could only be Methodists?

It might change our outlook on our life and our identity.

This story and our Scripture reading, Galatians 3:23-29, have less to do with denominational loyalty than with our identity. Richard Allen found a new identity and home in the Methodist Church. Even though he was mistreated by some misguided members, Rev. Allen’s new identity as a Christian was so compelling he couldn’t turn away.

¹ Bishop Kenneth Carder, *Living Our Beliefs: The United Methodist Way, Discipleship Resources*, 2009, pp. 13-14

² *Ibid*

Instead, he turned to God during his time of trial and followed a new path, a path filled with grace.

What’s your identity? Names are important, but the meaning of our name and what it signifies is more telling. Many of us have names that reflect our cultural heritage. For example, Eric can be a German name with one spelling and a Norwegian name with another. Esperanza has a name with a lovely meaning, in Spanish “esperanza” means “hope.” Her parents gave her that name because of the promise she embodied. We all have names given to us filled with meaning to our parents, grandparents and loved ones. They see great promise in us.

So what does it mean to be called a Christian? For those who have given their lives to Jesus, it means everything. We may not walk around thinking of ourselves as Christian. But we are. There may even be times when we cringe, because we see people dragging our Christian name through the mud. But it’s who we are. It’s part of our identity when we become part of the body of Christ, the greater Church.

Believe it or not, the place where the word Christian was first used to identify the followers of Jesus Christ was Antioch (Acts 11:26), a city in Syria. That’s when Gentiles were first openly accepted and baptized into the church by the water and the Spirit. Luke tells us people from the island of Cyprus, Phoenicia, Cyrene and Greeks all became believers in that church. Barnabas, the encourager, and Paul spent time in Antioch, meeting with the church and teaching a great many people for year. The result was a church filled with disciples from diverse backgrounds.

That’s a wonderful model for us today, particularly in southern California, which is a very diverse place to live. Knowing a little bit about some of you, I think it’s safe to say that 10-15 different cultural heritages are represented by those of us who are here this morning. We’re gathered, male and female, young and old, single adults and parents, rich and poor, Republican, Democrat, Independent and other, conservative, moderate and liberal, for a single purpose.

What’s that purpose? We’re gathered to love God through our worship. We’re all brothers and sisters created by God to “*love the Lord*

your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). We gather to hear the good news Jesus brings to us: God loves you. You are a child of promise. God’s love is freely and willingly given to you and all people. That’s God gift of grace. Even better, God’s love is available to everyone, any time and any place. There’s no where we can go where God’s love is not available to us.

The words of Genesis 1:27-28 tell us, “*God created humanity in God’s own image, in the divine image God created them male and female God created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it’*” (CEB). We are the *imago Dei*, those made in God’s image. All people on Earth are God’s creation, made by God for good works. God has blessed us to do so.

ALL people are made in God’s image. Spiritually, we’re free from the limitations and discrimination of the world (Galatians 3:23-29). We’re free from the rules of the Book of Law, the Old Testament. We don’t have to put our faith in the law. We’re to put our faith in Jesus. Jesus came as the Messiah to free us from slavery to sin, setting us free by faith. Once you give yourself to Christ, a wonderful thing happens: you become a new creation. Your identity changes. You become a descendent of Abraham, one of his spiritual children, a child of the promise God made. As Paul tells us in Galatians 3:28, “*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*” (NRSV).

It doesn’t matter where or when you were born. It doesn’t matter what gender, sexual orientation or social identity you have. It doesn’t matter whether you have issues with your physical, emotional or mental capacity. It doesn’t even matter if you don’t really believe in God or are angry or frustrated with God.

God loves you! You’re children of God filled with promise. Our value isn’t found in how popular we are, how much we make or our position. Those social markers don’t mean anything in God’s kingdom. That’s because God’s economy doesn’t run on the material or fleeting things of this world. God’s economy runs on love. We know that from 1 John 4:7, “*Dear friends, let’s love each other, because love is from God, and*

everyone who loves is born from God and knows God.” God is love. God is not gender, race, sexual orientation, immigrant, economic status or stuff. God doesn't care how much money you have in your wallet or stashed away in banks, bonds or the stock market. God is love. And God's love knows no boundaries.

Given all the challenges of the world, we have to ask a question: if God is love and we're all made in God's image, why is bias and prejudice so prevalent? I believe the answer has to do with fear. We fear what we don't understand. We fear things that are different from us (wasps, spiders, etc). We fear things we can't control because they make us feel vulnerable, not strong.

There's another, human dimension of fear. We have faults. We have bad feelings. And we know it. Those things combine to make us fearful. When we're afraid, we become demanding. We want to be in control. That works to make us even more self-centered. We put our own interests first. We want our needs and the needs of our family and friends to be met. And then, with what we have left over of our time, money and energy, maybe we're willing to help others.

The only antidote to fear is truth. God's truth sets us free, because *“There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment”* (1 John 4:18). Jesus didn't come to punish us, but to save us. John 3:17, *“God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world.”* You are God's child. You are valued and loved. You don't have to act a certain way or say all the right things or do any of the things humans expect. God. Loves. You. I don't know about you, but that makes my heart warm. I'm set free. I'm grateful. I want to return God's love. All God asks is for us to love to others in the same way.

That's the way of grace. It's a gift from God. It helps us to treat others with dignity and respect.

There's a sad paradox in the world today. The church is to be the source of grace that exists in the world, yet it's often not known as a place of grace by the world. Those in the world crave grace, forgiveness

and goodness because all that they know are competition, survival, and the lesson that everyone has to earn everything they have.

You know the expression, “if it’s too good to be true, there must be a catch.” Well, grace is the one thing that has no catch, because it makes good things happen. Yet that’s not the way people see Christians.

Phillip Yancy tells the story of a down and out woman in Chicago who spoke to a pastor. The pastor said, “*A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me that she had been renting out her daughter – two years old! – to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting her daughter for an hour than she could make on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. For one thing, it made me legally liable – I’m required to report cases of child abuse. I had no idea what to say to this woman. At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. “Church!” she cried. “Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.*”³

People like this woman and those outside our doors facing all sorts of trials need Jesus for refuge and comfort. They need to experience God’s grace. As difficult as it may be, they aren’t looking for us to condemn or hold back. Those in need want to be welcomed and made to feel like they have a place to belong, a community and extended family where they are safe where they can experience love. Sadly, the church is more willing to condemn and judge, to cast the first stone. God’s love calls us to offer grace.

What would it mean if we extended grace to:

- LGBTQIA community?
- The poor and homeless?
- Those who are elderly and infirm?
- Those who have a different skin tone or language?
- Those who have different political or social views?
- Those who have a different physical, mental or emotional capacity?

³ Yancy, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Zondervan, 1997, p. 11

Bishop Desmond Tutu said: “a person ... open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for [they have] a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing [they] belong in a greater whole and are diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”⁴

As Christians and United Methodists we are in “ministry with*.”
We are in ministry with people. You can't exist as a human being in isolation. We're interconnected. You can't be human all by yourself, you need others. When we're in ministry with others, we're living from a place of generosity. Far too often, we think of ourselves as just individuals, separate and alone, when we're really connected and what we do affects the whole world.

You are generous and loving people. God has blessed you. Esperanza and I have experienced those blessings in the few short months since we came to be with you. Many others have experienced it as well. I encourage you to embrace God's love and pass it on. That's a blessing. That's what it means to be Christian. That's what it means to love. That's what it means to be saved by grace. If you do, someday you may tell someone you “could not be anything else but a Christian and a Methodist.” To God be the glory!

⁴ <http://askubuntu.com/questions/424/what-does-ubuntu-mean>

Jeremiah 31:27-34 (NRSV)

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt - a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Galatians 3:23-29 (NRSV)

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.