

A PEOPLE OF STYLE (Second in series: Who Are We?)

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
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We are continuing the sermon series on the Bicentennial, the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Methodist Church in America. It is fitting on this Memorial weekend, when we remember our loved ones, to remember also our spiritual ancestors, the mothers and fathers of our faith, who brought us to this day and helped make us who we are. We're having an identity crisis in United Methodism. In this series, we're asking "Who are we?" Last week I made the point that we are a people of conviction, a people whose heritage emphasizes the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, the inner assurance, an inner conviction that sustains, motivates and propels us.

Today: we are a people of style. Style is the outward manner in which we live out our identity. Our self-understanding as a people of conviction is acted out, is expressed in our style, in our living. The outward appearance is the expression of an interior disposition. Now, as Methodists, how does our style differ? In what manner are we unique? In other words, how can you identify a Methodist?

A most obvious way in which many groups are identified is through dress. A member of the Hare Krishna sect is quite visible. We know immediately who they are. The Dunkards in Modesto, an Anabaptist group, are readily identified, as the men wear beards and black clothes; the women wear their hair in a bun and wear little bonnets and print dresses. What happens is that a religious group picks a period in history, usually when it was founded, selects the clothing and hair style of that period as its unique dress, and calls it sacred. Priests and nuns in their cassocks and habits are essentially wearing clothes of the Roman empire. The white alb that I am wearing essentially is the Roman toga, as are the choir robes.

Isn't it interesting how we tend to identify people by their dress, their style? But, it is a limited understanding. Can a person's character be conveyed by one's clothing? Is clothing a true identification of character? The "establishment" in our country is usually one style behind the youth. In the era of short hair for men, many of the establishment rejected youths who wore long hair and beards. They were called radical, weird, suspicious. Is it necessary to be suspicious of the current style and assume that the immediate previous style is somehow holy, or real-American, or manly?

I'm glad that Methodists have not adopted a particular style of dress or hair style or cosmetics or lack of cosmetics as a mark of our identification. Dr. Houghton, a new member of our church and choir and a retired seminary professor, has a wealth of stories about our Methodist movement. One of my favorites is his story about an early Methodist bishop of Montana. Because the territory was so large and the towns far apart, the bishop would stay in the homes of the people while on his journeys. One trip was particularly long, hot and dusty. He was staying in a parsonage in an upstairs bedroom when it began to rain. As he listened to the rain, he longed for a bath. So he took a bar of soap, opened his window, climbed out on top of the side building and proceeded to take a shower. But the combination of the water and soap suds on the tin roof became too much, and he slid off, falling to the ground. Can you imagine his consternation in having to knock on the door and call out for the pastor to bring out a robe for the fallen bishop! Some of you may recall that Bishop Stuart was bishop of Montana, but I am assured that this incident was before his time! I'm glad Methodists have not chosen a particular style of dress, or the lack of dress, as an identification mark of a Methodist!

Another style often chosen by groups as their mark of identification is behavior. Behavior was very important in our early days. John Wesley, our founder, was emphatic about behavior. As people were converted to Christ, Wesley organized them into classes and societies. These were usually unlearned people: miners, farmers, poor people. They met together to pray together, receive the word, watch over one another and help each other achieve the "form and the power of godliness." They were serious about it, and when a person backslid, he/she was expelled from the Methodist society. In 1743, according to Wesley's Journal, the following were expelled from the society in Newcastle:

two for cursing and swearing  
seventeen for drunkenness  
two for retailing spirituous liquors  
three for quarreling and brawling  
one for beating his wife  
three for habitual, wilful lying  
four for railing and evil-speaking (Railing means "speaking bitterly,  
complaining")  
one for idleness and laziness  
nine-and-twenty for lightness and carelessness

I wonder how we all would fare if our behavior were taken as seriously.

Barbara Heck, an early immigrant from England and a good Methodist, fumed at her cousin, Philip Embury. Embury was a lay preacher in England but since coming to New York, he had lost his zeal. Barbara Heck stood it just so long until one day she barged into her cousin's card game, grabbed the cards, threw them in the fire. Barbara Heck gave him heck, and Philip resumed his preaching. A good Methodist did not play cards. Through their efforts, the John Street Church was organized, and it stands there to this day, in the middle of New York's financial district.

In my hometown in Minnesota, when I was growing up there, it was quite simple to identify the groups in our town. There were two churches (Methodist and Baptist), two grocery stores, and two beer joints. We also had a smattering of Lutherans and Catholics. It was easy to tell us all apart. The pagans went to the beer joints, played pool, smoked and drank. So did the Lutherans and Catholics, but they were identified by also going to church as well as the beer joints. The Methodists did not go to beer joints, smoke or drink; neither did the Baptists, but they also did not go to movies, dance, play cards, fish or play ball on Sundays. I remember my Grandpa Norris, who was a strict Baptist, criticizing the Methodists because they fished on Sundays. The evangelicals were very strict about movies in those days. Isn't it interesting how times have changed, and now Hollywood stars are practically idolized by the Fundamentalists: the actors and actresses speak in their churches, appear on their TV programs, get elected President of the United States! A few years ago, a divorced movie actor would never be the hero of Fundamentalists. How times change!

Behavior is a means of identification, and there are some valid forms of behavior that should characterize Methodists today: fidelity in marriage, peacemaking rather than violence, abstinence from drugs, and so forth; but behavior, like dress, does not guarantee interior character. Because a person behaves in a certain manner does not necessarily mean that the inner person is in accord, or that the outward style is an expression of an interior disposition.

So, what is the style of a Methodist? How are we to be identified? John Wesley wrote a description of a Methodist in his writing, "The Character of a Methodist." He wrote,

A Methodist is one who has the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him; one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart and the desire of his soul, which is constantly crying out, Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee! My God and my all! Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.

To Wesley, the Christian religion is love, love of God and love of people. Love is not a passive sentiment, or a feeling, or an emotional bit of "goo." Loving God means to grow in holiness, sanctification and perfection. By these terms Wesley meant that our religious experience is a growing experience, growing into a wholehearted love of God and people.

Love of God and love of people are inextricably intertwined. Dean Inge wrote, "Hatred toward any human being cannot exist in the same heart as love to God." Love again is not necessarily a feeling; love is an action. Love is an act that grows out of a commitment to the growth of other people. Love is ministering to people's physical needs: food to the hungry, clothing to the naked. Love is outreach to persons so that they might grow, grow in maturity, grow in their relationship with Christ, grow in the discovery and use of their unique gifts.

Notice how Wesley emphasized that this love is a gift from the Holy Spirit, not a result of trying, striving or climbing, but a gift from God to a person who trusts, who relies solely on the grace of God, and has the inner conviction of God's presence.

That's how you can tell a Methodist. That is our goal. We are a people of conviction who love. We are a people who are committed to positive actions on behalf of others, those around us and around the globe. We are a people who love God, who rejoice in his presence, delight in his worship, yearn for God in prayer. We are a people whose style is love.

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