

A PEOPLE WITH A MISSION (Third in series: Who Are We?)

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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The day before Christmas in 1784 fell on a Friday. The ground in Baltimore was covered with a heavy frost as Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke, and 63 of the 83 Methodist preachers in the society gathered at Lovely Lane Chapel to consider the future of the Methodist movement in America. A stove had been installed. Some of the rude benches had backs pegged onto them, although John Wesley had been explicit in his rules about meeting houses: "Let there be no pews and no backs to the seats." Subtle changes were taking place as the American Methodists moved to sever ties with Wesley.

The need for the conference was great. The Revolutionary War had been won, and ties with England broken. Methodism could no longer continue as an outpost of Wesley's English movement. Nor could the independent Americans continue to obey the dictatorial Wesley, even though he was revered and loved.

The average age of those in attendance at the conference was 30. It was a young church, a young country, and the two would grow together. They organized the Methodist Episcopal Church at that Christmas Conference. The word "episcopal" was inserted in the title to make clear to a small minority that wanted the presbyterian form of government that the Methodist Church would be episcopal in its structure.

It was a church with a mission. In 1785, one year later, the first Discipline, the book of rules, was written. The mission was clear. In answer to the question, "What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?" it was wholeheartedly decreed, "To reform the Continent, and to spread scriptural Holiness over these Lands."

That was the vision: to spread scriptural holiness. Scriptural holiness was a phrase used by Wesley to emphasize the power of God's forgiveness and reconciliation. This was the message the wild American frontier needed to hear.

The phrase "scriptural holiness" also included the social relationships of people, the style of life of this new country. "To reform the continent" was the goal. For the first 100 years of Methodism in this country, that was the call, the goal, the challenge. And it was successful. The frontier was tamed, and no denomination contributed more to the taming of the frontier than the Methodist Church. The frontier was tamed; civilization, culture and salvation of souls were all tied together.

The early Methodists in our country did not separate salvation of souls from the need to tame the frontier. J. Harry Haines has written, "The spirit of Methodism was characterized by a zeal for the salvation of sinners, the nurture and edification of believers, and compassion for the powerless, the oppressed, and the dispossessed."

Wherever Methodists went, they built schools. Some of the great universities of our land were organized by the Methodists who believed that education was crucial in the reforming of the continent. Alcohol was soon observed to be one of the primary enemies of civilization on the frontier. The Methodists led the temperance movement, the anti-saloon leagues, the Prohibition movement.

Women have long been leaders in our church. They early gave support to the temperance movement and the suffrage movement, to grant women the right to vote.

The church was concerned about the race issue, and the slavery controversy divided our church as it did the country. The north and south churches were not reunited until 1939. One of the leading preachers in United Methodism today is a black woman preacher, Leontine Kelly. I heard her a few years ago in Pastor's School. When she was a girl her father, a Methodist minister, was appointed to a formerly all-white church in Cincinnati. She said it was the most magnificent building she had seen: Gothic architecture, beautiful, polished wood, crystal chandelier. Presidents had worshipped there; one had even been married there. There was a huge cellar under the parsonage. She didn't like to go down there because it was a dingy, dark place. But, her brothers liked to explore. Once they found a hole beside the furnace leading to a tunnel. Her father got excited and said, "I think you have found something. Let's go over to the church and check." They went over to the church and found that beside the furnace there were old boards. They removed them and discovered another tunnel. They crawled through it and came out in the parsonage. That evening, Leontine Kelly's father told them about the underground railroad, a network for helping slaves to escape to freedom. The runaway slaves were hidden in such tunnels and cellars. Her father taught them a wonderful lesson that evening. He said, "The greatness of this wealthy, white church is not in its architecture, not in its beautiful wood or crystal chandelier. The greatness of this church is in its cellar. We are on hallowed ground. This white church dared to take the risk to become involved, to care about poor, frightened, runaway slaves."

That is a page out of our glorious history. That is who we are: a people with a mission. The first century of our church was great because it was organized for mission, for the expression of compassion. There are churches today disobeying the law and offering refuge to runaways from El Salvador. There are churches today, including ours, reaching out to the displaced persons. A church is excellent, successful and effective when it is committed to the least, the lost and the last. Alfred Bamey writes, "All such religious acts as fasting, praying and attending worship services are as nothing compared to the daily offering of bread and water, justice and mercy to the marginal people of our world. Nothing but solidarity with the broken and bereaved and bleeding--those deprived of control--can be called true religion."

First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto: we will know our identity, we will know who we are, when we lose our life for the poor, as did Jesus: a people with a mission.

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