

Media and Graphics Notes

Sermon Starter Video?	Yes
Sermon Notes?	Yes, there are two scriptures on screen during the sermon.
Other Notes	There will be the Apostle's Creed as a responsive reading at both worship services after new members are received.

Key Questions

What is this sermon about?

This sermon is about the love – God's love for us and our opportunity to love God and our neighbor.

Why is this sermon important?

It is important because love is at the heart of God and who we are as Christians.

What is the context of this sermon?

This sermon is essentially one of the chapters of Steve Harper's book, "Five Marks of a Methodist." I used the iBooks edition as the basis for this sermon, which can be found online at https://itun.es/us/_NnO3.l

What are the next action steps?

Let God be the joy of your heart and the desire of your soul.
Receive God's love and let it flow you to others and back to God.

What is the good news (bottom line)?

The good news is that God first loves of us.

What are other key takeaways? (140 characters or less)

- "There is only one place to begin: the love of God. Here is the source, the supply, and the life – of every disciple. The love of God is the goal to which we aspire, and it is the means by which we reach it. A disciple loves God." Steve Harper in *Five Marks of a Methodist*



This content is adapted from Five Marks of a Methodist by Steve Harper.

Metadata

Topic(s)

1. Grow
2. Make Disciples
3. Share Christ

Sermon Books of the Bible

1. 1 John
2. Matthew
3. Romans

Tags

sermon, worship, church, Methodist, UnitedMethodist, UnitedMethodistChurch, FirstUnitedMethodistChurch, ElDorado, Kansas, GreatPlains, AnnualConference, GreatPlainsAnnualConference, love, God, JohnWesley

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This content is adapted from Five Marks of a Methodist by Steve Harper.

Matthew 22:36-38, CEB

“Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?”
He replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.

Response to Scripture

One: The Word of God for the People of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Introduction

Sermon Starter Video

Play sermon starter video.

Series Review

Buildings last because they sit on a firm foundation. Without a good foundation, buildings may exist for a while but they can't stand for long. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, understood that this is also true for our life of faith.

In 1742, he wrote *The Character of a Methodist*, which describe the “distinguishing marks” of a Methodist person. His original document remains a gift to us today. This sermon and series are adapted from the book *Five Marks of a Methodist* by Steve Harper. During this series we are taking a look at five marks which confirm our identity as genuine and fruitful disciples and followers of Christ:

1. A Methodist Loves God
2. A Methodist Rejoices in God
3. A Methodist Gives Thanks
4. A Methodist Prays Constantly
5. A Methodist Loves Others

Sermon Notes and Scripture Study

Take Notes - Bulletin

I invite you to take notes during the message today. You can find a place in your bulletin or if you have a mobile device you can open the Bible App and use the Events feature to take notes

God Speaking

Listen for God's word for you – something that helps you live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Whenever you hear it, write it down.

This content is adapted from *Five Marks of a Methodist* by Steve Harper.

Tool for Spiritual Growth

Then, take it with you so that you can grow in your faith outside of worship by reflecting on what you heard today, praying for others connected with our community and reading scripture

Prayer

Will you pray with me? O God, use these words to speak good news so that as individuals and as a congregation we will fear nothing but sin, desire nothing but you and live as part of your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

The Two Great Commandments

“We live the Christian life in relation to the two great commandments: the command to love God, and the command to love others. Directly or indirectly, everything else emerges from this way of love. John Wesley knew this. He had steeped himself in the Christian tradition, which was itself rooted in love. So first he wrote that a disciple loves God. By beginning with love, Wesley connects the rise of early Methodism with the essence of the gospel – with the very words of Jesus, and with the core motivation for everything that followed between the first and the eighteenth centuries. There was no other bonafide way to begin any Christian movement, awakening, or revival apart from the way of love. Wesley knew it; we must know it too.”

Jesus: Do you love me?

“Our life in Christ begins in the fact that we love God. We are like Peter, sitting with Jesus on the shore (John 21:15-19) and hearing him ask three times, “Do you love me?” There is no other starting point for the life of faith or the journey of discipleship. Jesus has to ask us more than once, as he did Peter, because we are prone to wander away from this core reality. And even if we find ourselves saying that we do love God, the repeated question forces us to look beneath the surface of our response to see what we mean by it.”

Illegitimate and Genuine Love

“Do you love me?” Jesus focuses our understanding of love in relation to a world that alleges to love all sorts of things. Some of our loves are illegitimate, and must be challenged by Jesus. But even when we embrace genuine loves, we must allow God to ask us if they flow from a divine center, or if they are a random collection of deep affections. The question “Do you love me?” isn’t Jesus’s way of excluding other loves but rather his way of bringing all our loves into a supernatural and holy relationship. And as Jesus said in referring to the love of God as the first and greatest commandment, it is a love that brings us (heart, whole being, and mind) together into a unified personhood. As Parker Palmer puts it, we are divided no more.”

This content is adapted from Five Marks of a Methodist by Steve Harper.

Wesley's Keynote Theme: Love of God

"In many ways, love of God was John Wesley's keynote theme for the rest of his life and ministry. We see it continuing in his sermon "Scriptural Christianity" (1744) where he lays the foundation of the love of God in ways that are remarkably similar to what he said in *The Character of a Methodist*. While looking at the first Christians on the Day of Pentecost, Wesley noted,

"This then was the very essence of his faith ... the love of God the Father."

"This is an interesting way to put it, because "the love of God the Father" can either mean God's love to us or our love to God. John Wesley wanted the early Methodists to read it both ways, first receiving God's love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, and then responding to that love by enacting the two great commandments.

Salvation = Wholeness

There is no greater day in the Christian life than when we discover that salvation means *wholeness*. It doesn't merely mean going to heaven when we die; it means living abundantly while we are here. But for this to happen, says Jesus – says Wesley – we must love God. In 1 John 4:19, we read these words:

We love because God first loved us.¹

Having received God's love first (1 John 4:19), we love God in return with everything we are and have. We do it in relation to every aspect of our life. We do it every day and to everyone. This is the first and foremost mark of a disciple."

What Kind of Love?

"But what kind of love is Jesus talking about? What kind of love does Wesley want the Methodists, indeed all Christians, to have? The Greeks had four words to describe it: *phileo*, *eros*, *storge*, and *agape*. The Christian life includes and is committed to all four. But the word used to describe the essence and foundation of God's love is *agape*. Unlike the other three words, this quality of love is based in the lover, not in the one being loved. In fact, the other person may not be very lovable. The other person may not be wanting our love – or at least not appearing to do so. But with *agape* we love anyway.

God's Agape Love

This is exactly how God loves us, and many of us have experienced this kind of love. We have experienced that Charles Wesley called "amazing love" and what John Newton called "amazing grace." This is what Paul meant when he wrote in Romans 5:8:

¹ 1 John 4:19, CEB.

“But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”²

Run from / to God

In the past we may have laughed at the thought of God, run from the presence of God, or spit in the face of God, but what we received in return was God’s love – variously described in the Bible as faithful love, loyalty, mercy, patience, forgiveness, and redemption, to name a few qualities. We now realize that if God’s love had been anything other than agape, none of us would be here. The whole foundation would have crumbled long before now.

We Stand in God’s Prevenient Grace

But ... we are here. We are alive. We aren’t destroyed by sin; we are saved by grace. Light overcomes darkness. We are unable to run from God without also running into God. This is what John Wesley and others call prevenient grace, the love that moves the hymn writer to pen, “O, Love that will not let me go; I rest my weary soul in thee!” We are dearly loved by God! And nothing can separate us from that love (Rom 8:35-39). Only the word *agape* describes this – the most radical kind of love possible. Unconditional. Unrelenting. Unending. Unbelievable!

Receive God’s Love

The first mark of discipleship isn’t a call to increase our love but to receive God’s love. The ability to love God comes from God! This is no self-help effort, no intensification of our devotion through a spiritual version of trying harder. The call to love God is a call extended by none other than God. The desire to respond with love is a desire put into us by God. As Eugene Peterson put it,

.....
First God. God is the subject of life. God is foundational for living. If we don’t have a sense of the primacy of God, we will never get it right, get life right, get our lives right. Not God at the margins; not God as an option; not God on the weekends. God at the center and circumference. God first and last; God, God, God.
.....

Danger of Loving God on Our Terms

A great danger in much of contemporary spirituality, Christian and otherwise, is that it keeps the focus on the self – the ego. And the peculiar thing about egotism is that it will let us believe in God and claim to love God, but always on our terms – no matter how sophisticated or subtle the affirmations may be. The sign of ego faith is that we orient our love in terms of personal benefit, even our love of God. “Have it your way”

² Romans 5:8, CEB.

becomes more than a hamburger-chain slogan; it becomes our life's motto. But the kind of love the gospel describes, and the kind of love Wesley affirms, is radically different.

This Love is Supernatural

It doesn't take very long for us to realize that this isn't a natural love; it is supernatural. Left to ourselves, we will love those whom we think are lovely. We will love others as long as they love us in return. We will love others for what we can get out of it – whether short-term or long-term. Wesley's call to love is one to which we respond, "I can't do this on my own!" This is right where we wanted the people called Methodist to be: people who renounce all attempts to love from the source of grace. We manifest our love through *phileo*, *eros*, and *storge*, but the simple source of faithful love is agape – the love of God that first possesses us, and then enables us to love that way in return.

God is the Object of our Agape Love

God is the first object of our agape love, because if God isn't our first love, we end up loving God for reasons that the self seeks. We will love God for what we can get out of the relationship. We will love superficially and capriciously. Instead we must love as one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost."

Conclusion

By naming the first mark of a disciple to be a person who loves God, Wesley is inviting us to step into the stream of scripture and tradition; to join with the first followers and the subsequent saints who have made the love of God their heart's desire, a desire made possible because we are made in the image of God; that is, created with the desire and the capacity to receive and give life.

Good News

The good news is that God first loves of us.

Call to Action

"By making the love of God the first mark, Wesley is leading us to embrace the disposition of our hearts, from which everything else flows. And as he points out, it is a love that makes God the joy of our heart. Let the power of Wesley's words sink into us:

.....
God is the joy of our heart, and the desire of our soul, which is constantly crying out, "Whom have I in heaven but you? and there is none upon the earth that I desire but you!" My God, and my all! You are the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!
.....

Let God be the joy of your heart and the desire of your soul.
Receive God's love and let it flow you to others and back to God.

This content is adapted from Five Marks of a Methodist by Steve Harper.

Invitation

“There is only one place to begin: the love of God. Here is the source, the supply, and the life – of every disciple. The love of God is the goal to which we aspire, and it is the means by which we reach it. A disciple loves God. Charles Wesley set this sentiment to music when he wrote,

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down,
Fix in us they humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown!*

*Jesus, thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation!
Enter every trembling heart.”*

Closing Prayer