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October 15, 2006
Romans 8: 31 – 39; John 15: 8 – 17

Questions of Faith: ‘Why I Am a United Methodist Christian’

When you walk down a grocery store aisle looking for canned peas, when you find the peas, what do you see? Many different brands—Green Giant, Del Monte, the Generic Store brand, etc. Same thing in the frozen food aisle: Bird’s Eye, Sunshine, and so on. But it doesn’t matter what the brand name—inside what do you find? PEAS! Yes.

Well, it’s the same with Christians—We come in different brands: Methodists, Presbyterians, Disciples, Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Assemblies of God, Orthodox this and that as in Armenians, Russian etc; and then there are generic community bible churches.

Instead of the word brand label we use the word “denominations” to distinguish us. And like peas you can choose between the canned or the frozen chosen..... But we’re all Christians.

I choose to be a United Methodist Christian. Do you know why you are a United Methodist? If anyone asked you, could you tell them?

I love the United Methodist church, not because this is a perfect church, because it isn’t—far from it. In fact, you have heard me criticize my church.

I criticize or critique my church when I believe it is necessary for the same reason I criticize or critique my country when I believe it is necessary: Because I embrace our United Methodist heritage, values and ideals, the principles we stand for—and I want our church to live up to those standards, to be the best it can be—and unless we hold ourselves accountable—who else will do it? How will we be any different or distinguishable from the rest of the world if we don’t know who we are or whose we are? If salt has lost its flavor it just blends in and is of no use—right?

I told you that Christians come in all different brand labels and that you can choose between the frozen and the canned versions. Let me clarify that a little further.

I heard a pastor on TV describe himself as a reformed theologian—He is coming from the Calvinist tradition. He believes that God is in control of everything—not only knows what is going to happen but actually makes everything good and bad happen, including natural disasters. He told the interviewer that he believed Mt. St. Helens was God’s design---that God used natural disasters to punish the people’s of the earth, to warn them of their evil ways. I called this the canned version of Christianity—or the cut and dried version. Nothing to debate here—or wonder about. God’s in control.

Do you believe that? Raise your hands if you believe this. Raise your hand if you don’t believe it. And its okay if you honestly don’t know because that’s why your Methodists!

Not because you don’t know—but because we Methodists believe it’s okay to be searching, to doubt, to examine and to question what we believe.

In fact we encourage it. There is no litmus test for being a United Methodist other than a sincere desire to flee from the evil of this world and find God’s salvation which we who believe affirm is in Jesus the Christ.

Is someone brave enough here to day to give us your “because” ---tell us why you don’t believe God causes natural disasters? (Wait for answers).

That’s right! You don’t believe that because you are Methodists. You don’t believe that as Methodists for a whole bunch of reasons. First and foremost is because of what Jesus shows and tells us is true about God.

What do we know about God? God is loving, God is patient, God is kind. God is compassionate. God forgives—how many times does Jesus say God requires us to forgive? 70 x 7—Seven is a perfect number in the bible representing the Sabbath, representing God’s Shalom—Gods’ peace, wholeness and well-being, representing the year of Jubilee—the year of blessing for all creation. Representing abundance and joy and life and love. All goodness. God is Goodness with a capitol G. In Jesus we see God portrayed over and over and over again as a loving, forgiving, giving and encouraging God.

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We just witnessed the horror of the Amish school house slayings. Did God use that gunman to punish these people? Of course not! But if we follow the logic of the pastor who believes God made Mt. St. Helens to erupt—an event which like the Amish school house shootings took innocent lives, then we are saying that God causes all things to happen both the good and the evil—see the difference between cause vs. knowledge of? That is a BIG difference! Where would the world be if we Methodists weren't around to point out the difference to folks?

Does God have the power to cause Mt. St. Helens to erupt? Sure. But God chooses not to use it. God chooses to give us some of God's power to act even as God chooses to refrain from acting—The expression of the power he gives us ---it's called free will.

That's another big difference between us as Methodists and other Christians. We know God has given us the freedom to choose to be for God or against God. To do the good or to choose the evil.

Other Christians believe there is no such thing as free will. Everything is pre-determined, pre-planned for a purpose by God. Every event in your life. All the evil and all the good. This understanding makes God the bad guy, doesn't it?

We Methodists believe in grace. We are a grace based people. We know we are sinners and only by God's grace through the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus are we freed from captivity to sin, freed for abundant living. We believe God loves us even as God loathes the sin we do.

But we believe God is at work fighting against our sin. God does this through what we can call pre-grace. Pre-grace is God's Holy Spirit running ahead of us, before we know how to choose the good and refrain from doing the evil, nudging us along, rooting for us, encouraging us towards finding God—like clues on a scavenger hunt—long before we believe or come to know God. We believe God desires the good and does everything possible short of violating our free will

to help us be all that we can be and find God through Jesus.

Other Christian churches don't believe that. They believe we are saved ONLY by faith in Jesus and by the act of Jesus' death—that we are so fallen, so evil, so depraved there is no goodness left in us at all and that God demanded Jesus' death as a substitute for our sin because God's honor had to be saved. Because we really aren't worthy of being saved at all and this is what God's grace is about. Period. A very depressing few of humankind's ability to be redeemed.

No free will offering of God's self for us, no God stepping in front of the on rushing train for us to rescue us out of love for us, no God saving us through the incarnation —the God in the flesh presence with us in Jesus reaching out to love and embrace us in God's hug—no awakening through his saving teachings—the ONLY way salvation occurs, many believe, is by Jesus death.

In this understanding there is no room for the possibility that everyone who met Jesus from the first could have chosen to repent and follow him. Although it was probably less than a 2% probability that this would occur given our bent to go our own way as children will who think they know it all—it still represents a BIG difference in how we as Methodists understand who God is and what God is about and how God feels about us.

The God of grace makes room for choice—even for wayward children. Then when we choose the wrong, instead of punishing us with a Katrina hurricane or a car accident, or a disease or whatever—we punish ourselves by having to live with the consequences of our actions. Consequences that often sweep in innocent victims because one sinful action is like dropping a pebble into a placid lake—the ripples go out catching everything that happens to be in the way. Like the collapsing sea walls around New Orleans. Who built those walls? Who refused to do anything about their inadequacies over the

decades? Who paid the price? The poor, the innocent, the powerless, the old, the helpless.

We Methodists have a relational faith—we understand God by being in relationship with God and with each other. We believe it is important to hold one another accountable for our discipleship and that we should watch over one another in love to keep each other from straying as all close family members are responsible for each other.

We believe God has called each and every Christian into ministry and gifted us with spiritual gifts to carry out our ministry. And that we have a moral imperative to transform the world. We are a missional people. We have ALWAYS been a missional people. We believe people are worth saving and it is God's desire to save every human being from evil, hurt, pain, oppression and, disease and tragedy.

And we don't believe God is going to eternally punish people who haven't heard about Jesus. Because Jesus says the first shall be last, we know many of us who say we are Christians ain't goin' there while many who doubt but do God's will ARE. Because we know we can't see what God can see and we know it's up to God to do the sorting out of any sheep and goats.

That's another BIG difference between us and other brands of Christians. We don't judge others. And another even BIGGER difference is the way we see the bible.

We understand the bible as a history of our relationship with God and to be the source of our understanding for how to be truly human in the world. The bible is our first source for understanding our relationship with God. It's our family photo album, and journal—it has all kinds of saints and sinners in it for our edification, instruction and exhortation.

Other Christians see the bible differently. They see it as an infallible rule book. It's pretty black and white. There are no allowable extenuating circumstances in life.

They believe scripture should be taken literally and applied the same in all

circumstances in all ages. Although I notice in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians it says that women should keep their heads covered because woman is the glory of man but man is the glory of God and so a man should not have his head covered. Everyone ignores that. Literalists ignore that. They ignore a lot of things in both the Old and New Testaments. Everyone is selective about what they chose to follow and not follow in scripture. They just aren't conscious of the fact.

But it does point out another BIG difference between us Methodists and other Christians: We believe the bible was written by real, finite people, doing their best to listen to God and often times, just like Paul, falling back on their cultural up bringing as they dealt with the immediate needs of their communities. They did the best they could with what they had—but it wasn't always what God had in mind.

The miracle is that through God's Holy Spirit we still come into relationship with God's will through the gift of scripture in spite of our limitations.

But we Methodist don't believe God's revelation is confined solely to scripture. We believe the power of God's Holy Spirit helps us apply God's word in contemporary situations using our reason, our experience, and the past tradition of the church to interpret scripture and inform us as to what God's will is in our current circumstance. Scripture is our starting point but God's will is different in different circumstances.

For example, during the Nazis era, Christians chose to hide Jews. When the Gestapo knocked on their door and asked them if they were hiding Jews—how many of them said, "I cannot tell a lie because the Ten Commandments say thou shalt not lie. Yes, I am hiding Jews."

No one did that. Extenuating circumstances in that context required the lie in order to do God's will of combating the evil of Fascism and save lives: the lesser evil in the fallen world to support a larger good for the work of the Reign of God.

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This is another BIG difference between us as Methodists and other Christians: we get ourselves into a lot of hot water because we believe in social holiness as well as personal holiness—we believe our faith informs our politics. INFORMS our politics—there's a big difference between informing and ENFORCING our faith in politics.

We believe our faith informs our political activity, but we don't believe God has called us to enact laws that will force this nation to be a Christian nation or all people to be Christians, or for all people to abide by our understanding of morality or pray our prayers.

We United Methodists use the slogan Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors. Because we believe the whole of the human race is God's family and our family because we Methodists believe in being inclusive.

That means we don't discriminate against people based on their differences—we don't condemn them or keep them down because they aren't male, or white, or American or our economic class, or developmentally disabled, or too old or too young, or because they worship differently than we do. That is our ideal. Do we always practice it? No. But we keep it out there and we work at it.

Many other Christian traditions do not permit people like me—women-- to be pastors or in any kind of authority over men. Sexism is enshrined as a biblical imperative---not based on anything Jesus said but on some of the things folks like Paul or Timothy said years after Jesus died.

At the same time it was Paul who said that in Christ there is no Greek or Jew, no male or female, no slave or free—all distinctions disappear. In our contemporary times, who are the outcasts we exclude and are offended by?

We United Methodists look to see how Jesus treated the outcast. God shows and tells us what we are to do in Jesus.

He ate with them. He associated with them. He preached to them. He sought them out. He helped them and healed them. He made room for

them at his table. Who are the outcasts among us that make our skin crawl, that we snicker at? That we ignore, that we put down? That we are afraid of. That we don't understand? That we think we are better than?

We are at odds over some of these folks as United Methodists—in particular I think of the gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual community.

In other Christian traditions there is no room for hand wringing or debate of any kind on this issue. These folks are all going to hell, period. Science be damned. God's saving grace for finding ways to include the excluded in healthy ways isn't even a thought that would cross anyone's mind.

But we Methodists, along with some other Christians denominations, we let it all hang out there as we try our best to figure out God's will. It isn't cut and dried is the point. There is room for debate. There is room for change. There is room for love. There is room for repentance on all sides. And somehow or other we manage to do it and stay together as one family. Will that always be the case? I can't say.

We did split over the issue of slavery in the pre civil war years. We are sinners.

But this sinner would rather engage the world for the sake of Jesus by erring on the side of love and grace than on the side of legalism and exclusion any day of the week. That's why I'm a Methodist. That's the way Methodists are. There are so many other reasons—time doesn't permit me to even scratch the surface of this old church of ours. I just want to stop here and say Thank you John Wesley for getting us started! And thank you Jesus for showing and telling us the way! For walking with us as we stumble along and find our way. Thank you, thank you, thank you! Let the people say, "Amen!"

And now let us join together in another truly Methodist understanding: we believe in surrendering our selves to the love of God, because we believe steadfastly we can trust God with our lives. Let us pray the Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan tradition printed in the bulletin.

Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition:

I am no longer my own, but thine,

**Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom
thou wilt. Let me be employed by thee or laid
aside for thee, Exalted for thee brought low
by thee.**

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing,

I freely and heartily yield all things

To thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.

**And the covenant which I have made on
earth,**

Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.