

“The Almost Christian”

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19, Romans 5:1-8

June 18th, 2017

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Today is Father’s Day. We remember their labors of love, dedication and hard work for their families. The Methodist Church doesn’t celebrate Father’s Day as part of our church tradition, but historically it has Methodist ties. In the United States, the first Father’s day service was held on July 5th 1908, a Father’s Day sermon was preached at Williams Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church now known as Central United Methodist Church in Fairmont West Virginia. And the national first Father’s day was celebrated on June 19th, 1910 at the YMCA in Spokane, Washington by Sonora Smart Dodd. Her father, the civil veteran William Jackson Smart, was a single parent who raised his six children. In 1909, on a Sunday, she heard a sermon about Mother’s Day at Central Episcopal Methodist Church. She told her pastor that Fathers should have a similar holiday to honor them. She asked her pastor and local religious leaders about having a similar day to honor fathers. She initially suggested Sunday June 5, her father’s birthday, but the pastor and local ministers did not have enough time to prepare their sermons, and they deferred the celebration to the third Sunday of June. (Pastors work hard to prepare their sermon every Sunday!) This is how Father’s Day started in our country.

There is a common ground between Father’s day and the divine image in Christian faith although church doesn’t celebrate Father’ Day. Jesus called God “Heavenly Father”. The Lord’s Prayer begins with words, “Our Father Who art in Heaven” Jesus taught his disciples how to pray to God, “God is our Heavenly Father!” Please don’t get me wrong. Our Methodist Church firmly believes that male and female in the image of God is not characteristics of the divine. Certainly I am not talking about a patriarchal, rigid, and stern image of God, but parental love for children. Truly, father symbolizes parenthood or primary relationship as the source of deep joy, belonging, acceptance and unconditional love. We thank our fathers because they show us these values in their relationships with their children. Spiritually speaking, God created us in his image and relationship with love. Jesus taught us that we are all sons and daughters of God. The purpose of Jesus’ whole ministry and his entire life dedication was to spread the love of God to everyone. The love and grace of God was the reason of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection.

As a father of two boys, I always want to be a good father with love. But I want to share a story that reminds me that I am still a work in progress.

Last Friday, it was a very hot day. My boys were bored and looked for something fun as always when they came home in the afternoon. I went to the Big Five store and bought two backyard outdoor water play items. One is a 12-foot long water sprinkler and another is a water baseball sport toy. It comes with an inflatable home base with sprinkler head and an inflatable bat, too. It is supposed to be attached to a garden hose. When water shoots up from the home base and the wiggling sprinkler sprays water, my boys were super excited as I expected. But it didn't take a long time for them to lose their excitement. When I attached the toy to the garden hoses, the water pressure wasn't strong enough to keep them excited. But worse, the inflatable bat wasn't holding air and the home base sprinkler didn't shoot water upright to play water baseball. I was a little frustrated when they were not excited. But that wasn't the end. While I was working on setting up the toy, I temporarily put my glasses on the grass. In a minute, when I picked up the glasses, I found that my glasses' frame was severely bended. Someone must have stepped on the glasses, but I wasn't sure who did it. For sure, it would be either me or my old son Jacob because we were there working together. Even though it wasn't clear who did it, I assumed that it was Jacob and I scolded him because I was so frustrated. Shame on me! I was so self-centered. This episode reminds me of who I am, especially my self-centeredness and "all about me" attitude in my relationship with my beloved son.

Our God is not like me. God is a good Father all the time and all the time God is perfectly good. God is always gracious to His children. God's doesn't blame us for our mistakes and faults. Rather He came down and died for us. Our first Old Testament reading praises God who has heard his people's voices and supplications and He responded to them. The Psalmist confessed that he decided to call on his God for the rest of his life because God listened to him. Our God is compassionate with love and care. The second Scripture reading reminds us of God's boundless love and countless care through Jesus Christ. God proved His true love not in the sacrificial act of His only Son's death, but it was God's death when we were still weak, self-centered, and so focused on "all about me" attitude. Christ died for us and showed us the Heavenly Father's unconditional love and acceptance as we are.

Today's sermon title, "The Almost Christian" comes from one of John Wesley's most famous sermons which he preached at St. Mary's church at the university church of Oxford in 1741. The young John Wesley was full of passion, love and desire for God. He was ready to follow Jesus Christ to be like him and pursue godliness. He fell in love with God and devoted himself to do everything for the glory of God and to love God with all that was within him.

In his sermon, he spiritually challenged Oxford faculty and students that Christians should be “almost and altogether Christians” not “half Christians”. What John Wesley meant “altogether Christians” is summarized by four bullet points. **First, love God passionately.** He emphasizes that “Altogether Christian” loves God in every possible way. John Wesley was inspired by the Apostle Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.” Wesley’s spiritual mentor, Jeremy Taylor, interpreted Paul’s words and taught that “every action of nature becomes religious, and every meal is an act of worship...as well as an act of prayer.” These words profoundly challenged John Wesley to see everything he did as being for the glory of God.¹ **Second, “altogether Christian” loves others wholeheartedly.** This love doesn’t mean your personal preference group or your favorite people around you. This covers “every person in the world.”²

This week, Bill Floyd and I are going to attend our Cal-Nevada Annual Conference. This year’s theme is “Testify to love. Your Story Matters”. There are five proposed constitutional amendments that the General Conference adopted last year in Portland Oregon. We will vote to make those become official to the Book of Discipline. The General Conference added more inclusive language to the gender equality and sought to eliminate discrimination against women and girls. **Third, “altogether Christian” has solid “foundation-faith” in Jesus as the Christ. Lastly, the “altogether Christian” has right and true faith.** It doesn’t only mean to believe the Scripture and God’s love as “historical doctrine” but true faith is real and sure trust and confidence in God.³

The Bible wasn’t written for the Israelites or someone else. Jesus was proclaiming just for you. The Bible is our testimony to God’s love for you. John Wesley preached to you that you become “the almost and altogether Christian” who experiences the love of God as your personal story. Often Christians are called “Protestants” because of the historical background in relationship to the Catholic Church. But we are not “protest-ants” rather we are “testifiers” to love and God’s full and inclusive love for everyone!

We are gathered here in the name of the church. What is the church’s job? The church is a community of faith and love in action. The church’s ultimate concern is to love God and to love our neighbors. That is what Jesus spoke to his disciples and still speaks to all of us. Amen.

¹ Adam Hamilton, “Revival: Faith as John Wesley Lived It”, Abingdon Press 2014, p.40-41, 56

² <http://www.covenantoflove.net/faith/wednesdays-with-wesley-almost-and-altogether-a-christian/>
Accessed June 16 2017

³ Ibid.