

## The Peaceable Reign of Christ – Chapter 4 - Rev. Michelle Hargrave

I've been thinking about the relationship between John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the United Methodist Church. Now, there were three boys in their family. John in the middle. Charles was the youngest and several surviving sisters at Oxford.

John and Charles started the Holiness Club together, and then they traveled to America and had many adventures there and returned home. And then around that time, Charles had his heartwarming experience, a few days before John famously did. Together, they created the Methodist movement, and while John was the preacher and organizer, Charles was the artist, writing 6,000 hymns. He put the Methodist way into hymn lyrics.

Most of their lives they were very close, but there was some tension between them when they were older. Both were Anglican priests and neither ever left the Anglican Church, but the Methodist movement was under pressure to launch a new denomination separate from the Anglican church, especially in the Americas.

This was right around the time of the American Revolution. Neither brother wanted the people called Methodist to separate from the Anglican church. They wanted to reform the church from within, but John did one thing that helped the American movement separate. He ordained, well, no— he consecrated, two clergy— Thomas Koch and Francis Asbury, as bishops, and this was irregular because he wasn't authorized to do that by the Church.

Now, all ordained United Methodists can trace their ordination in a line of succession back to John Wesley, but this act caused some tension between the brothers. Charles was insistent that the church remain unified.

We can see how Charles felt about church unity, about remaining together despite differences in a section of our hymnal, which is "United in Christ." Here are several hymns written by Charles Wesley. Just in this brief section, #550, "Christ from Whom All Blessings Flow;" #554, "All Praise to Our Redeeming Lord;" #561, "Jesus, United by Thy Grace;" #562, "Jesus, Lord, We Look to Thee;" #566 "Blessed Be the Dear Uniting Love." Our hymnal bears witness to how deeply Charles Wesley yearned for unity in the church.

In *Multiplying Love*, Paul Chilcote writes about how the disaffiliated Global Methodist Church has used John and Charles Wesley's words to support their view that separating was the best path forward. In chapter four, he focuses on the call to unity in scripture and in the Wesleys' own words. I find this list of hymns in our hymnal a strong witness to how deep this call to unity is in our tradition.

Charles Wesley needed to express his desire for Christian unity so much that one hymn couldn't hold it. I've been able to practice this spiritual discipline of Christian unity recently. One of the things that has delighted me in this last year, my first as a superintendent, is a deeper opportunity to develop relationships with my colleagues across the theological spectrum.

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My district and my pastors range from traditional to centrist to progressive, and everywhere in between. I have appreciated the opportunity to talk deeply about how we can be the church together– even if we disagree on some things, in disaffiliation conversations, clergy one-on-ones SPR meetings, as well as emails, texts, and phone calls. We have talked together about our connection as United Methodists and the gracious space that we have to be in ministry together.

I suppose it's partly because of the way The United Methodist Church formed that we have this. The United Methodist Church did not launch as a denomination because of theological differences.

As Theodore Runyan says in *The New Creation, John Wesley's Theology*, "Today, The United Methodist Church isn't concerned with just belief, which is orthodoxy, but also how we act (orthopraxy), and especially how we experience love, (which he calls Orthopathy). He says, "...orthopathy cannot be divorced from orthodoxy and orthopraxy, but provides other dimensions important for the genuineness of faith experience that is rooted in the presence and activity of the Spirit, experience that is consistent with past Christian experience reflected in Scripture and tradition, and experience that is expressed in works that extend to others the grace that has been received."

The United Methodist Church started as a movement of action and feeling– not just thinking. On page six, Chilcote says, "Faith is important, hope is important, love is more important." Then in chapter four, he lays out how this love gives us the opportunity to be united. He says, "Unity... bears testimony to the triumph of love and the possibility of beloved community. That means unity is a witness of our love for God and one another. What does this look like? It looks like this.

In the last election season, the churches of Grand Meadow and Dexter had these yard signs created with John Wesley's three simple rules. Do no harm, do good, stay in love with God. Knowing that our election seasons are tense and stressful times, they wanted a way to invite people to care for one another and stay connected to God in the midst of the season of competing yard signs.

Now, I am passionate about our civic responsibility to be involved in voting, and I don't think anyone should be silenced for their political views. But this sign in my front yard reminds me that we can still love one another, even if we vote differently. As I know, many of the people on my street do.

We can love each other even if we go to different churches, which on my block we do. And we can love each other, even if we are neighbors who don't have the same faith, which is also true on my street.

What about yours? What a powerful witness this is, that in a very divided nation, United Methodists in rural southern Minnesota are insisting that we can, while still doing acts of compassion and justice, while worshiping and praying in our churches, grow in love of God and our neighbors. This sign is an invitation to remain community, even with the tensions pulling us apart.

Charles Wesley wrote several hymns about unity that are in our hymnal, and many that are not. Here is one that is not included in our hymnal from *Scripture Hymns* in 1762:

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"No, they cry, it cannot be! Christians never will agree.  
All the world thy word deny; yet we on the truth rely.  
Sure in that appointed day, thou will give us all one way.  
Show us each to other joined, one in heart and one in mind.  
Hasten then the general peace, bid the people's discord cease;  
All united in thy Name, let us think and speak the same.  
Then the world shall know and own the divine hath made us one;  
Thee their Lord with us embrace sing thine everlasting praise."

I'm grateful for the heritage of Charles Wesley's hymns and I'm grateful for the impulse that we have in The United Methodist Church to lean towards love. In this upcoming season of division and discord, may we, together, lean towards love.

Amen.