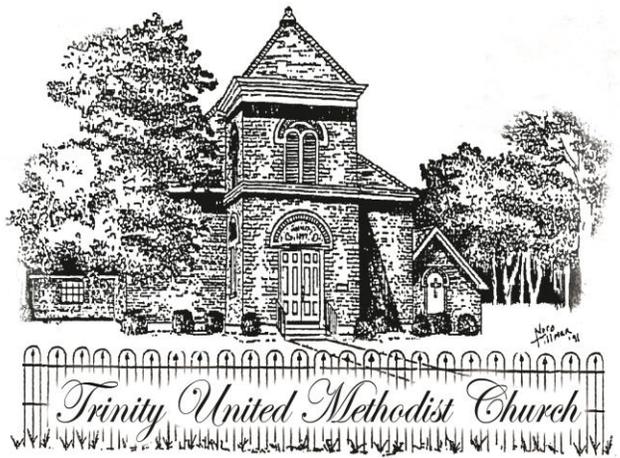




Trinity United Methodist Church Newsletter

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Do You Have a Personal Relationship With Jesus?

³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
John 13:34-35 NRSV

[In the coming weeks I will be discussing the Tennessee Conference’s initiative called 72+U that emphasizes the importance of the local Church reaching into the community to spread the Gospel. As an introduction to that material I am reprinting some articles that I first published over two years ago.]

The question set forth above is one often thrown around among Christians of different traditions. It is also a source of confusion and harm. Since it is a question that many Christians encounter at some time in their lives, I believe that it is worth some consideration.

First, let me acknowledge that there is, indeed must be, a personal element in our faith understanding. As Bishop McAlilly describes in his blog reprinted below, we long for a sense of acceptance by God, the sense that God has accepted us despite all our faults and sins. That sense of acceptance may come to us in a rush, in a moment in time, or it may be slowly realized over a period of time. However, there is a danger if we come to see our faith commitment solely in terms of a personal relationship with Christ.

I have most often heard this question used by persons raised in the Southern Baptist tradition. Many Southern Baptists seem to believe that, unless one can state the day, hour and minute that they first experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ that they have not truly accepted Christ and do not have a “personal relationship” with Christ. However, from the United Methodist perspective, this concept is theologically inadequate. While some people do, in fact, have such startling experiences of the presence of the Holy Spirit, many do not. For many, especially those raised in the church, the acceptance of the saving grace of Christ is something that occurs over a period of time. Contrary to the teaching set forth above, many people who have accepted the grace of Christ cannot state the day, hour and minute of their acceptance. They instead live with the quiet assurance of the constant presence of God in their lives.

There is a deeper flaw in the concept of the “personal relationship” with Christ. It discounts the consistent teaching of scripture that our relationship with God is always bound up in our relationship with others. In the Old Testament, the commandment given was to love God with all your heart, mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself. Deut 6:5; Lev. 19:18. The passage quoted above from John is one

of several from the New Testament that emphasize our relationship with God as tied to our relationship with one another. For instance, in Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus speaks of what we do for the least person around us as something we do for Christ. James 2:14-17 speaks of the futility of telling someone that they have received the love of God if they are in great need and we have done nothing to fill that need. More pointedly there is this statement:

²⁰ *Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.* ²¹ *The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.* 1 John 4:20-21 (NRSV).

Instead of having a personal relationship with Christ, Wesley spoke of "knowing Christ." Knowing Christ, for Wesley, meant accepting Christ as Lord and Savior and then living a life of Discipleship that evidenced the fruits of that relationship. The concept of knowing Christ fits in with Wesley's Doctrine of Sanctification discussed in previous articles. As Wesley made clear, Regeneration (being born again) is merely a beginning. We are expected to grow in our faith, to go onward to perfection by seeking to look at the world as Christ looked at the world; indeed to grow to have the very mind of Christ. The Southern Baptist tradition has a "once saved, always saved" concept that is absent from Wesleyan theology. Wesley believed that we could, after the rebirth, turn away from God and then experience again the rebirth through the power of the prevenient and justifying grace of God.

I have often been asked by parishioners what it means to have a personal relationship with Christ. I personally find the term offensive and presumptuous because to me it makes Christ sound like a fraternity buddy. It is also questionable because it assumes that there is some secret knowledge or experience that must be obtained in order to receive the gift of God's salvation through Christ. I most often tell my parishioners that I have a personal relationship with Christ the same way I have a personal relationship with the air I breathe. I don't get along well without air to breathe. I die. I don't get along well without Christ. I die.

Finally, this standard of being able to express a personal relationship with Christ is contrary to our understanding of the Table. Unlike the Southern Baptists, ours is a sacramental theology. Our personal relationship with Christ must always be seen in relation to the Table, those gathered around that Table and those whom Christ invites, yet do not come to the Table. Loving my neighbor **is** loving God. Loving God means loving the world and people God created. Thus my personal relationship with Christ must of necessity be caught up with my personal relationship with my brothers and sisters. When we gather around the Table we pray that we be made "*one with Christ, one with each other and one in ministry to the world.*" Expressing a personal relationship with Christ always involves expressing our relationship with others and the world. In that regard, consider again John 13:34-35: ³⁴ *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* ³⁵ *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* (NRSV.) Jesus himself defined discipleship in terms of our relationship with one another, not solely our relationship with Him.

In summary, do not allow yourself to be belittled or intimidated by those who question the depth of your faith because you cannot define your relationship with Christ in terms of some exceptional, ecstatic experience. Our relation with Christ cannot be reduced to one moment in our lives. It is a constantly growing and changing relationship just as our relationships grow and change with the people around us. Our relationship with Christ can never be solely expressed as unique to us. It must always be seen in relation to all of God's people.

Bishop's Blog

Bishop William McAlilly

Marcina Widerkehr writes in her book, [A Tree Full of Angels](#),

*Moving through the heart of every person in the universe
is a silent cry that yearns for understanding. The silent cry
is an ache for God, searching to be named. It is immensely deep.*

Question: When did you awaken to God's longing for you? Was it last year, 10 years ago, last week or this morning...or are you still waiting?

Of all the gifts we United Methodists offer the world, none is more essential than the opportunity to invite persons to awaken to God's longing for them through the person of Jesus Christ. What seems like a lifetime ago, I read Paul Tillich's sermon, *You are Accepted*, as a seminary student. It is a message that is as fresh today as it was when Tillich wrote it. The sermon is about divine grace. Tillich writes that "sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying 'You are accepted', accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know." We sing *Amazing Grace* with the familiarity of an old friend. However, like an old friend whom we have known for long stretches of time, we tend to miss the details. Perhaps this week you might choose to sit down in a quiet place and listen for the graceful sounds around you and in so doing, hear God say His word of acceptance to you.

"I once was lost but now am found." Most of us have been lost at some time or another in some wilderness of our own making. When we stop long enough to listen, we discover that Jesus is not as far away as we imagined, reaching out His hand to us, accepting us, forgiving us, calling us to a deeper walk with Him. We are people of Grace. May there be enough grace for you and for those you encounter on the Way.

Serving through Grace with you,
Bill
Ephesians 2:1-10

The Poverty and Justice Bible

The Poverty & Justice Bible is a bible that highlights each passage of scripture that deals with the issues of poverty and justice. There are more than 2000 references in scripture to poverty and justice, as opposed to four or five on such controversial subjects as homosexual acts or marriage. Yet many Christians seem to think that helping the poor is a pointless and even harmful act. As an on-going part of this newsletter, I will be providing citations to passages from the Old and New Testaments each week that deal with what scripture tells us about poverty and justice. If you are interested in learning more about *The Poverty & Justice Bible* you can check on Amazon.com or go to www.Justicebible.org.

*⁵Fools will no longer
be highly respected,
and crooks won't be given
positions of honor.
⁶Fools talk foolishness.*

*They always make plans
to do sinful things,
to lie about the Lord,
to let the hungry starve,
and to keep water from those
who are thirsty.
7Cruel people tell lies—
they do evil things,
and make cruel plans
to destroy the poor and needy,
even when they beg
for justice. Isaiah 32:5-7 CEV*

Scripture rarely pulls its punches. Here Isaiah puts fools and crooks on the same ethical plane who, because of ignorance or cruelty, seek to marginalize the poor.

*18 The message about the cross doesn't make any sense to lost people. But for those of us who are being saved, it is God's power at work. 19 As God says in the Scriptures,
"I will destroy the wisdom
of all who claim
to be wise.
I will confuse those
who think they know
so much."*

20 What happened to those wise people? What happened to those experts in the Scriptures? What happened to the ones who think they have all the answers? Didn't God show that the wisdom of this world is foolish? 21 God was wise and decided not to let the people of this world use their wisdom to learn about him. Instead, God chose to save only those who believe the foolish message we preach. 22 Jews ask for miracles, and Greeks want something that sounds wise. 23 But we preach that Christ was nailed to a cross. Most Jews have problems with this, and most Gentiles think it is foolish. 24 Our message is God's power and wisdom for the Jews and the Greeks that he has chosen. 25 Even when God is foolish, he is wiser than everyone else, and even when God is weak, he is stronger than everyone else. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 CEV

As Paul explains to the Corinthians, by the standards of many people the Gospel is foolish. Why should you make any effort to help someone you don't know and probably wouldn't like if you did know them. You look out for yourself, why shouldn't everyone else? That has always been the "wisdom" of the world and is a viewpoint that I often hear from our politicians. As Paul acknowledges, it is a foolish message we preach. Yet, it is that "foolishness" that the bible has demanded be the norm from the very beginning. As noted in the lead article of this newsletter, our love for God is dependent upon our love for God's world and its people.

Prayer Ministry

The following persons have agreed to be part of the prayer ministry at Trinity UMC:

| | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Elva Beard | Sarah Jordan | Kenneth Stevens | Judy Richardson |
| Larry Eastwood | Mac McAfee | Patricia Stevens | Charles Wilson |
| Leslie Eastwood | Rachel Newman | Sam Richardson | |

The members of the prayer ministry of Trinity United Methodist church covenant with one another to pray daily for:

- Those concerns on the prayer list of the Church and for healing of body and spirit for all persons listed;
- For each ministry of the church that each ministry would work to bring the Gospel to those within our community and most especially to bring the Gospel to those who have not yet accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior;
- For all the members of the Trinity UMC community that they be led and enabled to live as the Body of Christ;
- For our local community and all its needs, especially for those who are struggling with the burden of poverty;
- For our nation and our world that God help lead the people of the world to live in peace with God's Kingdom.

If you would like to be a part of this ministry (or if you have already spoken to me about it and were inadvertently left off the list) please let me know and I will see that you are added.

Up-Coming Sermons

January 25th Sermon: "Values." What is it we value? To what extent should our beliefs affect what we value? My texts are Mark 1:14-20 and 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.

February 1st Sermon: "I Know My Rights." In this day and time, many in our nation are focused on asserting their rights. I suspect that our emphasis on our rights has more than a bit to do with the proliferation of television crime dramas and the constant repetition of the Fifth Amendment rights. But, what are our rights as Christians? My texts are Mark 1:21-28 and 1 Corinthians 8:1-13.

Worship Leader's Schedule

January 25

Houston Hartsock, **Liturgist**

Linda Robinson & Pat Moran, **Greeters**

Donnie & Renita Hartsock, **Ushers**

February 1

Donnie Hartsock, **Liturgist**

Maurice & Joyce Edwards, **Greeters**

Rodger & Cherry Klein, **Ushers**

Announcements

The **UMW (United Methodist Women)** will next meet **Tuesday, January 27 at 6:00** in Fellowship Hall with a lovely catered dinner and a very exciting program. You won't want to miss this one! All ladies are cordially invited to attend.

The **Men's** group is planning a pancake breakfast on **Valentine's Day, February 14**. Breakfast will be served between the hours of **8:00 AM and 10:00 AM**. Please add this event to your "Must Attend" calendar.

Companions in Christ New Series on **John Wesley, "Revival,"** began Sunday, January 4. If you are looking to deepen your faith in 2015, join us for a video journey following the life of John Wesley and exploring the defining characteristics of a Wesleyan Christian. Wesley's story is our story. It defines our faith and it challenges us to rediscover our spiritual passion.

The DVD features pastor Adam Hamilton guiding us through a Bible study tracing Wesley throughout England. It intends to deepen people's faith by calling them to a devout and holy life while defining what the Christian life looks like through his eyes.

January Birthdays

Cherry Klein, Dawn Stevens, Dennis Meaker, Ensley Mason, Rene Fetting, Judy Richardson, Linda

McGill, Jessica Moore

Happy Birthday to each of you!