

“A Living Legacy”

November 16, 2025

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Philippians 4:8-9 (NRSVUE)

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

Today is Anniversary Sunday, a day that we celebrate milestones of membership for members of our congregation. In a few minutes, we will recognize and celebrate those who have been part of this congregation for 25 and 50 years. This year, Anniversary Sunday carries added significance, as we mark 150 years since the establishment of the first Methodist congregation in what is now Cleveland Heights. From humble beginnings in the Superior Schoolhouse, this congregation was birthed.

To mark this anniversary, we created a timeline of historical events in the congregation, reflected on our impact, and shared anecdotes from our congregation’s past. In three years, we will celebrate 100 years in building, and we are already beginning to plan *that* celebration.

As I page through the Red Book, visit the archive room, or just pay extra attention as I walk through this extraordinary building, I often find myself imagining the lives of the people who have called this place home across the decades. So much history, so many lives, yet one in mission. (If you are unfamiliar with the Red Book, stop by the welcome desk in the Windermere-Living Hope Tower Entrance and check it out. We’d love for you to have one. You are welcome to make a donation to offset the cost, but you are not required. Everyone at Church of the Saviour should have a Red Book.)

In my imagining, I also wonder what this community would be like if Church of the Saviour hadn’t existed – if we hadn’t been dedicated to the mission of sharing the love of God on the East Side of Cleveland; if we hadn’t celebrated the Good News in person, by television, by radio, and now by the internet; if we hadn’t been one of the first racially integrated churches in Greater Cleveland; if we hadn’t welcomed refugees from Syria and Ukraine and Haiti; if we hadn’t hosted youth exchanges from around the world; if we hadn’t dedicated ourselves to sharing food, clothing, housing, and financial resources in this community, across the country, and in Zimbabwe, Haiti, Cambodia, Liberia, and the U.S.-Mexico border.

As you celebrate the accomplishments of Church of the Saviour, what makes your list? What achievements are you proudest of? What do you consider to be the legacy of this congregation? What will future generations remember and celebrate about us?

Success in ministry can be measured in many ways – baptisms, membership, people served in mission – but the *best* measure of effectiveness is how we love. When Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment, he gave two: *love God and love your neighbor*. The Apostle Paul wrote, “Now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). *Church of the Saviour, your legacy is love.*

We could spend the next hour just recounting examples of how this church has demonstrated love of God and neighbor. There are lots of stories to tell, and we should continue to tell and retell those stories. But as the great theologian Billy Joel once said:

*You can get just so much of a good thing
You can linger too long in your dreams
Say goodbye to the oldies but goodies
'Cause the good old days weren't always good
and tomorrow ain't as bad as it seems*

So, rather than focusing this morning on the *past* 150 years, I want to invite you to look ahead to the *next* 150 years. What will be the story of Church of the Saviour for the *next* century-and-a-half? And in the time that you have been given on this earth and in this congregation, what will your contribution be to the ongoing story of this church?

Throughout this series, we have been focusing on John Wesley’s teaching on Christian perfection. As Rev. Patterson shared last week, one of the questions all candidates for ministry are asked before they are ordained is a question that has been around far longer than the 150 years this church has been here. It dates from the time of John Wesley himself, the founder of the Methodist movement: “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?” The correct answer to the question, believe it or not, is “Yes.” For Wesley, Christian perfection meant nothing more and nothing less than this: to love God with your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. While none of us can do that all the time, it is possible to have glimpses, moments in time when we completely love God and neighbor. Wesley taught that, by God’s grace, we “move on to perfection” in love, by which he meant that those moments happen more often and last longer. As we grow in faith, God is perfecting us in love.

This morning, as we celebrate our legacy and look ahead, I offer Wesley’s advice from the conclusion of his teaching about Christian Perfection. He had seven words of advice. Seven is a

good number. It symbolizes perfection or completeness. But I've condensed it down to three, since three also is a good biblical number and because I don't want your lasting memory of this day to be how long you had to sit and listen to the preacher.

The first advice is: *Keep an Open Mind and an Open Heart*. For Wesley, growing in our capacity to love requires that we remain *teachable*. Wesley didn't limit teachability to learning from *Methodist* teaching. He advised the early Methodists not only to follow *his* guidance, but to listen to those who *disagreed* with him. He understood that none of us has a monopoly on wisdom. We all have much to learn, even from our opponents.

Look, we all like to be *right*, whether it comes to relationships or politics or theology. We each have opinions and beliefs, and most of us have preferred ways of staying informed about things that matter to us. But increasingly, the sources of information we choose paint only a partial picture while overlooking or disparaging other perspectives. Truly neutral sources of information are hard to find. The result is that our biases are intensified and our talking points are sharpened, but our capacity to listen and truly understand is diminished.

Wesley lived long before the time of 24-hour news networks or social media, but he understood human nature. He saw in himself and others a tendency to believe our own ways of thinking and acting are correct while dismissing others. He identified that as a form of pride, which is the root of every sin. Our pride keeps us from having the kind of love that Jesus taught. He understood what we have been slow to accept: *Certainty is more dangerous than doubt*.

Instead of digging in our heels, Wesley urged us to turn to the Word of God – not to proof-text our ideas by looking for a verse or two that seem to support them, but to consider the context and to measure them against the *entire* witness of scripture. He also encouraged us to use our intellect to weigh those ideas more deeply, to examine how the church has interpreted similar ideas across time and consider how they hold up in our lived experience and in the experiences of others. We refer to these four sources of authority – scripture, reason, tradition, and experience – as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. To be more precise, we should always read *scripture* through the lenses of *reason, tradition, and experience*.

Even when we follow the quadrilateral, we may still reach different conclusions than others. Those differences should not be viewed as *obstacles*, but *opportunities* to keep learning from one another. Unfortunately, we seem to have lost our capacity to stay in relationship with those who disagree with us. We see that evidenced in government, in social media, even in personal relationships. The church is not immune, either. The United Methodist Church has weathered a season of disaffiliation, with congregations and members leaving over differences of theology. That separation has been painful. But more than that, disaffiliation betrays the fellowship on which the church is built. Schism is a terrible witness that the body of Christ has failed in its

love. Wesley would have been dismayed that differences in doctrine – especially when it came to who to include in the life of the church – would become a pretext for dividing us. For Wesley, unity did not mean unanimity. The only thing he insisted we be unanimous about is loving God and loving our neighbors. There is nothing remotely Wesleyan about breaking fellowship or trying to force others out.

We are in a new era in the United Methodist Church. But we should not be so naïve as to think that this will be the last time, we disagree with one another. A lesson we must carry from this season is the resolve never to repeat it. *Keep your minds and your hearts open.*

The second piece of advice is: *Embrace the Freedom to Love*. Galatians 5:13 says, “You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don’t let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses but serve each other through love” (CEB). As followers of Jesus, we have been set free from sin. That means that we have also been set free from constantly striving to make up for our sin. But that doesn’t mean that our actions don’t matter or that we should stop following God’s commandments. Spiritual disciplines are how we participate in God’s saving work. Freedom from the power of sin should not cause us to neglect the practices of our faith: worship, grow, serve, give, and invite. Salvation is not a one-and-done event; it is a continuous process of God working in and through us to perfect us in love.

The law of good works is not nullified by love but fulfilled by love. We should never miss an opportunity to do good. Wesley is often quoted as saying, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.” We do not earn grace by doing good works. Grace is entirely a gift from God. But the good works we do carry on the work of God. Paul said, “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5:14).

We should never miss an opportunity to do good. But our motives matter, too. If we’re doing good so we can be congratulated for it, are those actions deserving of praise? If I am kind toward others so they will think I am a loving person, am I truly loving? Jesus said, “Seek *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). I don’t think that was meant as a formula, but as an instruction about priorities. *Whatever you do, put God first* (not *me* first, not *America* first; *God* first). Psalm 37:4 reads, “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” The Prosperity Gospel movement reads that to mean that if we truly love God, we will get everything we want. But that isn’t how I read it, and it wasn’t how Wesley read it, either. A more faithful interpretation is that if we love God with our entire being, and put God’s kingdom first, our hearts will change. They will conform to God’s heart. *Our* desires will become *God’s* desires. Following the way of Christ

becomes no longer a challenge to meet, but a joyful fulfillment of our purpose. *Embrace the freedom to love.*

Finally: *Be Exemplary in All Things.* When people see you, they should see Christ. Your actions should reflect the love of God that is in you. I shared a quote recently that is often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, but it merits repeating: “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words when necessary.” Because God loves us unconditionally, we should never miss an opportunity to show love to others. Jesus said, “By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

“Finally,” Paul wrote to the Philippians, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things... and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:8-9). *Be exemplary.*

Church of the Saviour, you have faithfully followed the path God has laid out for you. One hundred fifty years is a long time. But we also remember that “a thousand ages in God’s sight are like an evening gone.” Or, if Isaac Watts isn’t your jam, perhaps you prefer the psalmody of Christine McVie: “Don’t stop thinking about tomorrow. It’ll soon be here, better than before. Yesterday’s gone. Yesterday’s gone.” Church of the Saviour, God is not finished with you yet. Love like those who know they are loved beyond measure. And may God, who brought you this far by faith, keep you and sustain you for the next 150 years and beyond. Amen.



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