

Shiloh United Methodist Church
Piety is Connecting with God

Luke 17:11-19

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Luke 17:11-19 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, ¹³ they raised their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, show us mercy!”

¹⁴ When Jesus saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” As they left, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. ¹⁶ He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Weren’t ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up and go. Your faith has healed you.”

One of my favorite author’s is a man named Reuben Job, a United Methodist Bishop and author of *Three Simple Rules* and *Three Simple Questions*. He tells this story:

I grew up on a farm in central North Dakota, and my earliest memories are of planting and harvesting our crops with horse-drawn implements before we or our neighbors had tractors. In the springtime I would hurry home from school, do my assigned chores, and hurry out to where my father was plowing with a two bottom plow pulled by five horses or seeding wheat, oats, barley, or some other crop with a ten-foot wide drill pulled by four horses.

No matter how cold, windy, or wet it was, I would walk behind the plow or stand on one of the little platforms of the drill until darkness came and my father decided to go home.

Time and time again he would encourage me to go home and get warm. But no matter how tired, cold, or wet and miserable I was, I would not go home until darkness fell, my father unhitched the horses, and we went home together.

Why did I stay when the weather was beautiful and when it was absolutely miserable for a little boy? Because I would do almost anything and put up with almost any discomfort to be with the one who loved me.

This week we continue our series on Faith by Numbers, and as I shared last week we are studying grace this month. This week and next we are studying the Methodist means of grace. On your Grow Pray Study guide you will find today's questions will help you explore in your life where you might be practicing acts of piety. And where you might want to grow in this area. Acts of Piety are the practices of grace that help us to connect to God.

On the back you will see our Methodist cross of discipleship, on the top are Devotion and Worship, these are the two areas we are concentrating on today. Below you will see a rule of life written by Methodists in our area, helping you understand how to live grace out in your life. All of these tools will be on the GPS this week and next, as we continue to learn.

Piety(connecting to God) is the top of the circle and acts of Mercy(connecting with others) are the bottom of the circle.

Let me explain where this understanding of the means of grace comes from. To do this we have to go back to our friend John we have heard about each week for the past several weeks. John we know has found deep failure in his life, and at one point had thought of never sharing God's message of love with anyone ever again. Like many of us, John had understood God's love in his head, but not in his heart. Then John had an experience of feeling so cared for by others and by God that he felt he had to go share God's love in the world.

This John character is John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement who practiced ministry in the 1700s in England. We learn about John because he took a movement of field preachers in England who were reaching the poor and rejected people newly out of debtors prisons and working in factories, and gave them hope and a place to grow personally and spiritually in the Methodist movement.

What was remarkable about John's movement is he empowered others to follow God's call and lead the movement. He methodized faith in a way that helps others understand who they could be, and to live their faith out. He did this by writing books and series of rules to help people grow in their faith practices.

Take one such set that is in your hymnals that sit next to you each week. If you open to front of your hymnals you will find rules on singing from John Wesley. Read through them if you will, why I preach today. You may laugh at some, but John was taking people who could sing a good pub tune and helping them learn music that he believed would connect them to God and transform their lives.

Remember John understood that a personal and community relationship with God was important to help people feel God's love, a love that Jesus' reminds us will help us find life abundantly, wholehearted life that is what God intended for humanity.

This desire to stay with the one we love, to learn and gather what we can from this loving relationship is what Wesley hoped when he outlined his acts of piety. In my Pastor's corner today I outline all of them. These are the things that keep us close to God's love, that fill us up and if we practice them regularly then we will find it giving us the strength to follow a wholehearted way of living in our life.

Individual Practices – reading, meditating and studying the scriptures, prayer, fasting, regularly attending worship, healthy living, and sharing our faith with others.

Community Practices – regularly share in the sacraments, Christian conferencing (accountability to one another), and Bible study(learning more about faith together).

Our scripture today I believe highlights that while it might seem easy to stay connected to God, we sometimes don't always know how to stay engaged. We heard earlier that Jesus came upon 10 people all suffering illness, and skin illness which in Jesus' day would have meant these 10 were untouchable and outcast. Additionally, we learn in the story that the one who returned was a Samaritan, and these people were not supposed to understand how to connect with God in the right way. In Jesus' day these people were known to connect with God in all the wrong places.

In this story though we find a couple reminders worth noting. 1. Jesus' heals all people, even if they might not come back to share thanks with him. 2. Many people when healed or receiving grace do not recognize where it comes from and do not know to come back to their healing to accept connection. 3. Jesus' delights in an ongoing relationship with the ones God heals, and we can understand that Jesus being 3 in 1 with God that God delights in this connection as well. 4. Even the people we might think don't know how to connect with God, might be the ones who teach us how to go back to God. Samaritans are not supposed to know how to do that in Jesus day. Yet, this Samaritan is the only one that turns back to the relationship of love and healing.

John Wesley understood this, and this is why he embraced practices of both personal connection with God, but also community ones too. He believed a balance could be found by practicing these things together and by ourselves.

Let me take us on a little adventure in the Greek language for a minute to help us understand why it is so important to engage in acts of piety as people of Christ.

There are two terms that have guided an understanding of the relationship with God since the early days of Christianity. The

Apophatic tradition and the Kataphatic tradition. The Kataphatic is that God can be known and spoken of. God can be known and described. The Apophatic tradition is that God is not knowable and is a mystery, that God is so unfathomable we cannot understand God. The danger of the Kataphatic is sometimes we believe we know all there is to know about God. We build a fortress around our understanding of God and fight to defend it. The alternative though is if we are too apophatic our God becomes foggy opinions and has no real influence on how we choose to live our lives.

(On paper I wrote God exists on Kataphatic side and God is a mystery on apophatic side. Bow to the mystery, or seize the certainty.) We either bow to a mystery and get lost in the awe of it, or seize the certainty and sometimes miss the greatest chances to see God while defending what we think God is.

Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people.

Rachel Held Evans

Wesley believed by engaging in personal and community practices we would find the balance between these two positions. I think he knew that humans rarely can see the whole picture, and we need reminders of where God's presence actually might be. He believed the practice of communion in particular had the power to pull us together and remind us of our shared connection to God, despite our understandings or misgivings.

Let me give you example of how I believe the sacraments, the personal practices of God, and the communal practices of God bring us back to the balance of finding a relationship with God in our lives. This is a story by a man named Timothy Paul Jones

Timothy never dreamed that taking a child to Disney World could be so difficult – or that such a trip could teach me so much about God’s outrageous grace.

Timothy’s idle daughter had been previously adopted by another family. He was sure this couple had the best of intentions, but they never quite integrated the adopted child into their family of biological kiddos. After a couple of rough years, they dissolved the adoption, and Timothy’s family ended up welcoming an eight-year-old into their home.

For one reason or another, whenever their daughter’s previous family vacationed at Disney World, they took their biological children with them, but they left their adopted daughter with a family friend. Usually – at least in the child’s mind – this happened because she did something wrong that precluded her presence on the trip.

And so, by the time Timothy’s family adopted their daughter, she had seen many pictures of Disney World and she had heard about the rides and the characters and the parades. But when it came to passing through the gates of the Magic Kingdom, she had always been the one left on the outside.

Once Timothy found out about this history, he made plans to take her to Disney world when their schedules would allow.

Timothy thought he had mastered the Disney drill. He knew from previous experiences that the prospect of seeing cast members in freakishly oversized mouse and duck costumes somehow turns children into squirming bundles of emotional instability.

What he *didn’t* expect was that the prospect of visiting this dreamworld would produce a stream of downright devilish behavior in their newest daughter. In the month leading up to

the trip to the Magic Kingdom, she stole food when a simple request would have gained her a snack. She lied when it would have been easier to tell the truth. She whispered insults that were carefully crafted to hurt her older sister as deeply as possible — and, as the days on the calendar moved closer to the trip, her mutinies multiplied.

A couple of days before the family headed to Florida, Timothy pulled his daughter into his lap to talk through her latest escapade. “I know what you’re going to do,” she stated flatly. “You’re not going to take me to Disney World, are you?” The thought hadn’t actually crossed Timothy’s mind, but her downward spiral suddenly started to make some sense. She knew she couldn’t earn her way into the Magic Kingdom — she had tried and failed that test several times before — so she was living in a way that placed her as far as possible from the most magical place on earth.

In retrospect, Timothy was embarrassed to admit that, in that moment, he was tempted to turn her fear to his own advantage. The easiest response would have been, “If you don’t start behaving better, you’re right, we won’t take you” — but, by God’s grace, he didn’t. Instead, he asked her, “Is this trip something we’re doing as a family?”

She nodded, brown eyes wide and tear-rimmed.

“Are you part of this family?”

She nodded again.

“Then you’re going with us. Sure, there may be some consequences to help you remember what’s right and what’s wrong — but you’re part of our family, and we’re not leaving you behind.”

Timothy would like to pretend that her behaviors grew better after that moment. They didn’t. Her choices pretty much spiraled out of control at every hotel and rest stop all the way to Lake Buena Vista. Still, they headed to Disney

World on the day they had promised, and it was a typical Disney day. Overpriced tickets, overpriced meals, and lots of lines, mingled with just enough manufactured magic to consider maybe going again someday.

In their hotel room that evening, a very different child emerged. She was exhausted, pensive, and a little weepy at times, but her month-long facade of rebellion had faded. When bedtime rolled around, Timothy prayed with her, held her, and asked, “So how was your first day at Disney World?”

She closed her eyes and snuggled down into her stuffed unicorn. After a few moments, she opened her eyes ever so slightly. “Daddy,” she said, “I finally got to go to Disney World. But it wasn’t because I was good; it’s because I’m yours.”

It wasn’t because I was good; it’s because I’m yours.
That’s the message of outrageous grace.¹

Piety is simply practicing outrageous grace, by taking part in acts of piety. It is responding to something that does not seem to be present right here and now to everyone, and yet it is if we allow ourselves to be tuned into the love, and grace God offers. It is admitting God is a mystery at moments and solidly our spiritual father at others. If we take the time we can connect to God’s healing grace in our lives, and if we practice we will learn to find it more easily and return to it more freely.

Shalom on your journey.
Amen

¹ <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/the-perfect-illustration-for-gods-outrageous-grace-an-excerpt-from-proof>