

FAITH IN ACTION

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 5, 2019
based on Jude 20–23***

There's an old story about a community where all the churches had gathered together for a meeting. Suddenly fire broke out the building, and every church did what came naturally.

The Methodists gathered to pray. The Baptists cried out "Where is the water?" The Quakers sat in silence, quietly praising God for the blessings that fire brings. The Lutherans hammered a notice on the door declaring that the fire was evil. The Unitarians reasoned that the fire would burn itself out if just given the chance. The Fundamentalists proclaimed, "It is the vengeance of God." The Episcopalians formed a procession and marched out. The Christian Scientists concluded that there was no real fire. The Catholics started a collection to pay for the damages. The Presbyterians appointed a chairperson to appoint a committee to look into the matter and make a written report. The church secretary grabbed a fire extinguisher and put out the fire.

I like to think that the secretary in the story was Methodist, because in that case the story lifts up two key aspects of who we are as United Methodists. In the image of the Methodists gathering to pray, the story would point to the fact that Methodists emphasize a personal connection with God. Our founder John Wesley's pivotal spiritual moment was when, as he said, "he felt his heart spiritually warmed," in a personal experience of Christ as Savior. Ever since, Methodists have emphasized that the Christian life is not simply an intellectual belief in some religious ideas; it is a personal journey with God. At the same time, the image of the secretary putting out the fire would point to the fact that Methodists have always believed that real faith will express itself in decisive action; and so we as a church are very active in mission and service to the world. We thus insist that Christian living has two essential dimensions—the "vertical dimension" of our relationship with God, and the "horizontal dimension" of our outreach in ministry to the world.

The idea that the Christian life has two essential dimensions is rooted in the teaching of Jesus, where he said that there are two great commandments: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. [Mark 12:30–31] Many people would readily agree with the idea that we should love both God and neighbor. The problem today is that love is so often conceived as an inward feeling or disposition. Love for God thus means having a belief in some sort of deity; and love for neighbor means having a kindly disposition toward the people you meet. But the love that we see in Jesus is something much more than this. Jesus does not simply profess a belief in a divine reality; he models an active connection with his heavenly Father; we see him, for example, rising early in the morning and going

off to a remote place to spend time in prayer. And the love that Jesus has for other people is far more than a nice feeling; he actively reaches out to others with numerous concrete deeds of help and service.

The idea that we are to *actively develop* both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Christian life is reflected in the passage we heard a few moments ago from the letter of Jude. Jude writes, “As for you, build yourselves up on your most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.” [Jude 20–21] Here is the vertical dimension of faith in God; and clearly for Jude faith is not merely some static belief, but it is an active, ongoing movement of the heart toward God. He talks about “building ourselves up” in faith, praying under the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, “keeping ourselves” in the love of God, and maintaining a perspective in which we are looking toward God’s promises. This means engaging in spiritual practices such as worship, Bible study, and prayer, so that we can continually develop our relationship with God.

In the next two verses, Jude continues, “And have mercy on some who are wavering, save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.” [Jude 22–23] Here is the horizontal dimension of the Christian life, and again Jude is calling for active engagement, whereby we energetically reach out in loving help to people in all sorts of challenging situations. When he says, “Have mercy on some who are wavering,” he is talking about supporting people who are wrestling with difficulties or anxieties or doubts. When he says, “Save others by snatching them out of the fire,” he uses particularly energetic language, as he speaks of acting decisively to help people who are either physically or spiritually in dangerous circumstances. When he says, “Have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies,” you might be wondering what on earth he is talking about—but the reference here is to ancient laws which specified that a garment or “tunic” worn by a diseased person, particularly a person afflicted with leprosy, was to be handled *very carefully*. What Jude is conveying here is a sense of realistic caution. Even as we seek to energetically reach out in ministry, we need to have some prudent limits so that we do not become entangled in the problems that we are attempting to address. One example of this occurs whenever there is a natural disaster in the United States such as a flood or a hurricane, and people want to help. Our missions agency routinely sends out an appeal asking people not to head down independently to the affected area; because if people just show up in an area that has lost a lot of resources, they themselves become part of the problem. In other words, our desire to be helpful needs to be channeled in such a way that we truly create good, which is why we are most effective when we work through the church and other social agencies where there are people who know what they are doing in difficult settings.

The idea that the Christian life involves the active development both of our relationship with God and our outreach to others provides the basic shape for our Confirmation program. In Confirmation, seventh graders in our church come together once a month on a Saturday. In the morning, we have a session on some aspect of Christian faith, focusing on our relationship with God, and its implications for our relationships with others. Then in the afternoon, confirmands go a field trip to a mission site to put faith into action in service to others. This reflects the fact that Christian living includes love for God and neighbor, and the fact that both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of the Christian life need to be actively pursued.

The basic conviction that faith involves action is expressed in a key feature of our Methodist identity which we discussed in a recent Confirmation Class—the General Rules of the Methodist church. If anyone ever asks you what the “method” is in Methodism, the quick answer is “the General Rules.” John Wesley laid out three simple rules which serve as fundamental guideposts for how to go about living as a Christian.

One of them is: “Do things that draw you closer to God.” Notice that this is not simply a call to believe in God; it is the encouragement to actually do things that will draw you closer to God. In Wesley’s original old-timey language the rule was phrased, “Attend upon the ordinances of God,” by which Wesley meant doing such things as going to Sunday worship, engaging in daily prayer, studying the Scriptures, or being a part of a small group in church. The point is that our love for God becomes alive and deep when we are actively engaging in ongoing spiritual practices.

The other two general rules are “Do no harm,” and “Do good,” which are both aspects of loving our neighbor. “Do no harm” refers to all sorts of behaviors that would hurt other people. It also includes avoiding behaviors that would harm ourselves, such as drug abuse, and avoiding behaviors that would harm the whole planet. “Do good” is a rule that is especially important in our age, when many people imagine that the moral life consists of not hurting anybody. Wesley insisted that it is not enough to do no harm; we also need to actually do good in the world, which is why our church is extensively involved in a broad range of mission work.

You will notice that each of the three General Rules starts with the word “do”—a clear expression of our conviction that faith is alive and effective when it is in action. At the same time, lest we think that our own doing makes everything possible, Jude gives us a reminder, at the very end of his letter, that it is God who sustains us, and it is God whose empowerment will make all of our action bear fruit. In every aspect of our doing, we will be on the right track when our spirits are lifted to God. Jude put it well as he said, “Now to the One who is able to keep you from falling, and to enable you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to God be the glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever.” (Jude 24–25)