

October 19, 2014

Laity Sunday

Lakewood UMC

Theme: Disciples Called to Action: Engaging in Small Groups

Matthew

Acts

As you know, today is Laity Sunday. We do this every year....and every year I get out my dictionary and define laity for you. Well, I am not going to disappoint! The Catholic Encyclopedia tells us the word laity comes from the Greek laos meaning "the people." Laikos means "one of the people". Laity means the body of the faithful, outside the ranks of the clergy.

Wiktionary.org says laity is people of the church who are not ordained clergy...the common man or woman.

I thought it might be interesting to learn where this tradition of Laity Sunday began.

The first "Laymen's Day" started in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1929. It was originally the third Sunday in May and was designated as a day that would be inspirational to the laymen. Obviously a sign of the times, it focused only on the ministry of the men. It was so successful that after the merger of the Methodist Episcopal and Methodist Protestant churches in 1939, it became an annual observance and February 23, 1941 was the first designated Laymen's Day in the Methodist Church. Shortly after, an issue of The Methodist Layman magazine states:

Think what this could mean to the church! Forty thousand laymen — lawyers, physicians, teachers, bankers, businessmen, mechanics, farmers and others — speaking on The World Mission of the Church!

The whole Methodist Church will be moved and stirred to action by such a message. ...There are vast possibilities for good in Laymen's Day. It is the prayer of the General Board that every Conference, District, Associate District, Charge and Church Lay Leader and every District Superintendent and Pastor will give wholehearted cooperation to make the day significant in the life of The Methodist Church.

The day was first mentioned in the Book of Discipline in 1944. In 1972, the Book of Discipline had renamed it to Laity Sunday so as not to exclude either gender. The dates have changed through the years but today, the third Sunday in October is set aside for the celebration.

Now, this may seem like a boring history lesson but I do have a point. It is to show you how important the laity is in our Methodist tradition. How important you are...each and every one of you. Important enough for the General Board of Lay activities to designate a day to celebrate you. Important enough for United Methodist Layman magazine to call for “serious preparation for this day and for Pastors to give active cooperation.”

Important enough for the Book of Discipline to state the purpose of this day “shall be to interpret the role of laity in the world and to provide laymen with opportunity to witness to their faith in Jesus Christ and their commitment to his mission in the world.”

John Wesley sent the first two of his lay preachers to America from England in 1769. Back in these days of early Methodism these “circuit riders,” as they were known, were used to spread the gospel in the colonies. Each was assigned a circuit (what we would now call a charge), which was usually between 200 and 500 miles around, and the rider was expected to complete the course in two to six weeks, sometimes preaching several times a day. They would meet in people’s homes, stores, schools, taverns or even outside...anywhere that they could gather a group of Christians. And not just on Sundays. With the distances they had to cover it could be any day of the week. The circuit riders were not usually formally educated as pastors and often hadn’t even been raised as Methodist. The young men who entered this system often had some skills; many were apprenticed to trades such as blacksmithing, saddle making, or carpentry. In fact, the early American Methodists asked four questions about each candidate offering himself for the circuit riding ministry:

1. Is this man truly converted?

2. Does he know and keep our rules?
3. Can he preach acceptably?
4. Has he a horse?

Organized Methodism in America really did begin as a lay movement.

These men were actually lay people....just like you and me.

Every year a theme is designated for Laity Sunday. This year's is "Disciples Called to Action: Engaging in Small Groups." Our scriptures today reflect that theme. From Matthew 18:20 "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." And from Acts 2 "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues[a] as the Spirit enabled them." "

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and

possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

We have all heard the story of John Wesley and his Aldersgate experience where he “felt his heart strangely warmed.” Having returned to England from America, discouraged and disillusioned, in his journal he writes:

“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a Society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change, which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more special manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now felt in my heart....

After my return home I was much buffeted with temptations; but cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my

eyes, and He “sent me help from His holy place.” And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now I was always conqueror.”

With this renewed faith, John began preaching all over his country, riding an estimated 250,000 miles on horseback and using lay preachers and “societies” to help spread the word. So begins the “class meeting” or what we would call small groups. Wesley encouraged all believers to join the small groups for prayer and bible study. These meetings may have often begun with the question, “How is it with your soul?”

These societies were meant to help people grow in "holiness of heart and life." Small groups gave believers and seekers alike a place they could receive support, accountability, and encouragement. These “Methodist Societies” were one of the foundations of the Methodist movement and are just as important today as they were in the time of the Wesley brothers. We could actually go even further back to Jesus. He had a small group himself, comprised of lay people....his 12 disciples. We know that they were not educated the way our pastors are today. We don't know what jobs they all had before Jesus found them but we know 4 of them were

fishermen and one was a tax collector. Ordinary men called to do extraordinary things. They were Jesus' small group, the men He relied on....the men He taught to go out into the world to be His witnesses.

I hope you are getting the picture of just how important the laity actually is. I think sometimes people think of the term laity in a negative way....that somehow it means they are not that important but without it, there would be no Methodist church. Just look at some of the things lay people do. We have lay leaders, lay servants, lay ministers, missionaries, deaconesses, home missionaries, class leaders, liturgists, lay speakers, congregational care ministers, youth directors, Christian educators, and others I am sure I didn't mention.

Even though we don't have to ride horses to go out and spread the Word of God, we...the lay people...still need to go out and spread the Word of God! I also hope you are beginning to see the significance of the small group in helping to grow our faith and the faith of others.

Can you imagine living alone on an island and trying to be a Christian? First of all, who would even know? Who would hold you accountable? Who would ask you "how is it with your soul?" Who would be there to comfort or support you? Being a believer, we need community and fellowship. Wesley believed that there is "no personal holiness without social holiness."

We are called to make disciples but to do that we need to be disciples.

Participating in a small group will help to keep us accountable as Christians and give us the encouragement, strength and faith to do just that. There are so many opportunities to engage in. We have choirs, Sunday school classes, Bible studies, United Methodist Men and Women, the prayer shawl ministry, youth group, Epilogue...I am sure I have missed some but you get the idea.

Our mission is to **To introduce** people to Jesus Christ by inviting, welcoming, and engaging;

To nurture disciples of Jesus Christ
through a network of small groups
and

To provide Christian worship, educational
and fellowship opportunities for all;

And to provide
mission and service opportunities
locally and globally.

So I encourage you to find a group that interests you, get involved and ask
“How is it with your soul?”