

Sermon: *Catholic Spirit* by John Wesley (1749)

2 Kings 10.15-16a; Mt. 5.43-48

2 Kings 10.15-16a

And when Jehu departed from there, he met Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him; and he greeted him, and said to him, "Is your heart right with my heart as mine is with yours?" And Jehonadab answered, "It is." So Jehu said, "If it is, give me your hand." So he gave him his hand. And Jehu took him up with him into the chariot. And he said, "Come with me and see my zeal for the Lord."

Matthew 5.43-48

"You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of God who is in heaven; for God makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you only love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you only salute your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the unbelievers do the same? Therefore, you must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Two years ago a hundred long-time Saint John's members, new members and visitors, were asked this question: what do you value most about this church. At the top of their list: spiritual growth, caring community, theological diversity, a church that is open to people with different views all seeking God together. It made my heart glad, because I too want to be in a church like that. But I was also struck by how Methodist that is.

To illustrate that, I want to share with you one of the most important sermons ever preached by John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. I'd preach it every year; it's that important and relevant today. It has everything to do with the Methodist claim to Open Hearts, Open Minds and Open Doors.

Before I start—a bit of clarification. When Mr. Wesley uses the word catholic, he means universal, the universal Christian spirit, not limited to any one denomination. Also, Wesley's sermons were quite long by today's standards and, of course, he spoke in the language of his day. I have shortened the sermon significantly and attempted to translate it into today's American English. Please do read the original and check to see if I've hit close to the mark.

Hear now Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit" first presented in Newcastle, England, in the year 1749.

The Bible says, in Leviticus 19, "Love your neighbor." For the longest time I thought that meant love your family and love your friends; but that's not exactly what Jesus meant. Jesus meant, love everybody, even your enemies. That's a strange kind of love don't you think?

In John 13, Jesus said: "love one another, as I have loved you." Want to be a Christian? That's the proof according to Jesus.

Does everybody here agree with that? It seems to me that most people agree with that. But do most people practice that? In my experience the answer is "no."

Where are the Christians of today? Where are the people who love as Jesus loved? I believe there are two reasons why most Christians today do not love as Jesus loved.

1. We don't all think the same; we disagree on a lot of issues.
2. Because we don't think the same, we don't love the same either.

There are all kinds of people in the Christian church with all kinds of ideas; but we don't often celebrate that diversity. Instead, we let our opinions divide us. We become enemies, even in the church.

What happened to the Word of God? Jesus tells us to love one another, even our enemies. So I ask you: can we not have one heart, even if we are not of one mind? Can't we love each other, even if we have different opinions?

In 2 Kings Jehu met Jehonadab and said to him: "is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart? If it is, give me your hand."

Now did you notice? Jehu did not ask about the other man's opinions; and I bet he had some, even strange opinions, even wrong opinions.

Look around you. Don't you think at least some of these people here today have a few peculiar ideas? You probably think that person in the next pew is wrong about most everything; and it may be true.

This is only natural. We're human beings, with limited minds. No one has perfect knowledge. It's natural that we don't all agree. This has been true since Adam and Eve.

And it's quite natural for you to believe that your opinion is the correct one. You wouldn't hold tight to your opinion if you didn't think it was true.

Some current examples: some say stem cell research is a good thing; others disagree. Some people are of the opinion that we need a marriage amendment in the constitution; others disagree. Some are of the opinion that Mr. Bell is best qualified to lead our state; others think Mr. Perry is best qualified, or Grandma, or Kinky. And they wouldn't hold tight to their opinions if they didn't believe they were correct.

But listen: how can you or anyone ever be certain that an opinion is correct? We can't; because there is so much that we don't know, so many things we don't understand and maybe never will. Part of being human is being wrong, at least sometimes.

I know this is true for me. I don't have perfect knowledge; therefore, I must be wrong, at least sometimes.

So I need to ask myself: how deep is my ignorance? How many prejudices have taken root in my mind? How often do my prejudices shape my opinions? Surely I am guilty of many wrongheaded ideas.

So I beg you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, be compassionate. Give me the same respect and freedom of thinking that you want for yourself.

The catholic spirit only asks us to do one thing: to unite our hearts in Christian love. Not, is your opinion right; but is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart? Do we love as Jesus loved?

There's another thing I need to say: in the catholic spirit we are not indifferent to other people's opinions. O no. Indifference is a child of hell; indifference to others is a curse. We must consider other people's ideas with the same respect we want to receive.

At the same time, be fully convinced in your own mind. A foggy mind with no consistent principles will always miss the mark.

I am fully convinced of my own beliefs. But in the spirit of Christian love, I do not expect my opinions to be the rule for you or for others. All I ask is this: can we love one another as Christ loves us? Is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart? If it is, give me your hand.

Now, you may ask, what does it mean to have a "right" heart? Simply this. Do you love others with a Christian love, even your enemies; and do you show this love, not only in what you say, but also in the way you live? Let all the controversial issues stand aside. If you seek to love God and all God's children, then give me your hand. This is Christian love; this is the true catholic spirit.

So, where do we go from here?

1. I ask you to love me, love me with a tender affection, as a brother in Christ.
2. I ask you to be patient with me and love me in spite of my wrong ideas.
3. I beg you to pray for me, pray that God will give me wisdom and fill my heart with love for all humankind, even love for people who are wrong sometimes.

And my friends--be very sure. These things I ask of you, I am eager to do the same for you: to love you and be patient with you, in spite of your wrongheaded opinions. And I will pray for you, that God will give you a love that knows no prejudice and has no limits.

A true catholic spirit loves all people with an unspeakable tenderness and a longing for their welfare, just as Jesus loves us.

Hear me, O child of God, and think on these things. Let us have our own opinions and respect one another. And let us be united in the catholic spirit of Christian love. Is your heart right, as my heart is with your heart? If it is, then give me your hand.