

Sermon given on August 30, 2015 at First United Methodist Church, Beaverton Oregon.



“What I know about being a good Methodist”

So when I sent the first “stream of consciousness” version of this sermon to Pastor Kathy I called her and I said, “maybe you would rather have a hymn sing? Firedrill practice?” She instead said it was good and helped me make some changes and find some bible verses.

So let me tell you what I know about being a good Methodist....

My late hamster, yes a hamster—those little rodents in the wheels running all the time, taught me much about being a Methodist. Yes, hamsters are great teachers. So let me share my first observation from my late hamster, Bandit. I would take the hamster out of his cage and put him in a plastic see-thru ball. I learned that it was important to place the hamster on the edge of the ball and see if he was ready to get into the ball. Now most folks just pop the hamster in the ball and then the hamster runs all over the floor inside the ball and then you take them out ball later. You kind of pour them out of the ball. What we, we as in the hamster and I, both learned was that it was important to ensure that before you get in to the ball that you use the hamster little boy's room first. Yes that one time when I popped him into the ball and later I found the hamster to look a bit dazed and covered with well you can imagine. I put the dazed and unhappy rodent in its cage and then grabbed the vacuum and retraced the hamster's path. It was possible to determine the path the unhappy little fellow followed. So what does this have to do with Methodists? How many times have you been asked to head a committee or something else and well you get to it and before you know it there is also a path that others can follow? A good Methodist like a wise hamster makes sure that everything is OK before jumping in. Don't want to have to vacuum later. Now how is this connected, "there is time for everything. A time to get into the ball and a time to not get into your ball." (Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8) All right a loose translation but it still is something I learned. I try to take on new jobs here at the church, like giving a sermon, only after I prepare and ensure that what I had to say is good. Don't want anyone cleaning-up after me.

Bandit, the hamster, was a very good Methodist. We turned his cage around once, I am not quite sure why we did that anymore, and he always walked to the back of the cage, hamsters have poor vision, to find us and then turn around and then walk, on his back legs, and come and get his carrots and other treats from me or others. He for the rest of his life never noticed that the cage was reversed and always went the wrong way. I would often call to him halfway and he would then turn around and you could see a sparkle in his eyes. "Silly human is backwards again—when will he learn," I could almost read this in his furry face and expression. Bandit is a rodent and he is hard-coded to certain patterns and will always follow them. I then began to notice how many patterns I had and how much "hamster" I was doing. Why do I always sit in a certain pew? Why do I always pick the same hymns at a hymn-sing? We all have habits and it is part of what we are. As Methodists we try to have healthy and holy habits. Just like the hamster I find it bit silly when things break my habits, but I try now to meet the visitors and talk to folks I don't know well. We Methodists, despite our name, are trying to resist the natural "hamster" and not always do the same thing. Jesus called the disciples by saying, "Follow me" (Mark 1: 16-20) not "enjoy the same pew every Sunday."

Changing gears now away from hamsters what did Jesus teach me about being a Methodist? Well I have noticed that we are always broke—from the start. Nobody mentions that Jesus was well funded from what I have read. I also have noticed that when things were going poorly with his church there was a little matter of thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26:14-16). Jesus drives out the moneychangers. (Matthew 21:12-13—also in the other three Gospels) He asked us whose picture is on the Roman coins. (Matthew 22:15-22) When he attracts a large crowd his fellow church members say they do not have the money to feed the crowd—Jesus feeds them without buying anything, “what do you have?” is what he asks. (Matthew 14: 13-21) It was enough. We Methodists are always running short as we try to have face the monetary part of the world and say, “This is all we have and it will be enough.” I read once that Wesley said something like “Make all you can and give all you can” or something like that. Let us now face the truth; we are not here for the money, the incredible finery of our buildings, and our excellent special blends of coffee. We are here for other reasons.

Jesus also gave us an example what to do when we make mistakes. Remember the hamster and not making a mess—when we make a mess remember Jesus had some staff-parish items. *Aside: I am chair of the staff-parish relations committee that helps with the staff and its hiring and all that—HR to most of you in the working world.* Besides Judas and the coins, he had a problem with his rock his Petra: Peter (John 21: 1-19). Peter had denied him three times before the chicken crowed as Christ predicted. I hate it when you get staff-parish issues that are predictable. Jesus could have written Peter up or put him on an action plan for improvement or demoted him from being head disciple. None of this happened. Instead he appears on a beach and cooks and serves food not to his employees but for his friends. He then asks Peter to feed his sheep—tend the church. He asks him three times and Peter is a bit flustered but accepts the task. All is repaired. A Methodist solution, camp by a lake and cook and talk it out—could have been Suttle Lake. When we have problems we Methodists forgive each other and cook and eat and talk. It makes us whole again. When we had the protesters and we were cooking hot dogs and that was really fun was it not? The protesters told me I would burn in hell like my hot dogs. I did protest back to them that it was cheap shot and besides I did not burn any hot dogs. So often I remember, “Feed my sheep.”

So what have we learned so far about being a Methodist?

- 1) We try to plan and execute and avoid getting into our hamster balls and leaving trail behind us of stuff. “There is a time for everything.” We are called Methodists after all.
- 2) We are creatures of habit and we should stick to habits that make us be better people and also not to become too comfortable. Remember: “Follow me.”

- 3) The church and the Jesus' followers have always had money problems. Jesus was not rich. We have to have faith and say, "What do we have—it will be enough" and face a future of uncertainty and budget problems, always.
- 4) We have to forgive ourselves and follow Jesus' example. A shared meal and talk to work out things is best—We are Methodists and food and meetings work for us, "Feed my sheep"

Moving on to a few more things about being a good Methodist.

Back to the hamster, now we all know that hamsters are not known for using Newtonian physics and ability to calculate using vector calculus. Bandit would amaze friends by doing a U-turn in the ball. He would run full out, not really that fast, and then head right at another silly human and just before hitting the human would do a breaking u-turn at full speed and turn the ball in a perfect U and move on. You could almost hear the giggle, if hamsters could giggle, when he would do this. He would also bank the ball and come at wide arches around the room. He could also brake and reverse at full speed. I have no idea how to begin to build a robot ball that could do what the hamster did. I gave Bandit carrot slices almost every morning and he would "pouch" them and eat them later, except one. He would eat one with me there. We would share a meal in the morning. The carrot slice was larger than a hamster brain, but Bandit still understood the value of a shared meal. The point is that there are some amazing things out there and the impossible is happening all the time. There are terrible things in the world, ISIS, poverty, violations of people's person and property, and other horrors. God supplies also little miracles like Bandit nearly violating physics with his ball. I have faith that much will work out in this world because I have seen little creatures do impossible things. When I read about miracles in the stories I do not look for some explanation—I accept that something just happened and I am glad for it (Mark 8: 22-26).

The hamster was ill once. We took him to the vet. The vet, knowing the size of hamster teeth—they are all teeth actually; decided it would be best to use an anesthetic gas on Bandit. The tiniest little gas mask I have ever seen. Bandit was quite fine. The bill would have paid for ten hamsters. I learned how important one little hamster was to me. We are not always rational about each other and I think that is a good thing. I do not always want to count the cost. Some things are more precious to me than gold. Jesus reminds us of this when he tells us that even the hairs on our heads are counted (Luke 12: 7). I think I understand this—I think parents understand this even better. We also did not really count the costs when becoming a Reconciling Congregation. It was just the right investment.

Bandit passed away a long time ago—he lived a very short happy life. My father passed away a few years ago. Susan’s father, Ben, is gone. I have learned to live without some loved folks. I have spoken to many here about their experience of losing family members—not just a hamster. My mother-in-law Leta, a lifetime Methodist, told me that she still misses her parents and it has been hard for her all these years and she misses them every day. I have now understood more and read in John: 11 that even Jesus cried for his friend and he is God and even brought him back. So the sadness I feel for family, friends, and even a pet that are now gone is better with all of you. I need you and you need me. We have a journey, sad sometimes, to walk together. It is so much easier to walk with you than alone. Methodists are here in this church for each other too. We want to do this thing called life and worship and sadness and happiness together. It is better together—at least that is what I have found out.

So what more have we learned about being Methodist?

- 1) There are amazing things to experience. Look for them!
- 2) We don’t always count the costs. We know we have to do some things anyway.
- 3) Our journey is better together. We are stronger together and our different places in our life journey allow us to comfort and help each other.

Hamsters, the larger ones not the miniature ones, are from the area near Megiddo in Israel and Syria, the place where the ancients fought war after war. Hamsters likely slipped into the packs of these armies and “pouched” their grains and food and then escaped. Imagine Romans being raided by hamsters! I do not know why God placed ridiculously cute creatures in the fields that are named as the place of the end of the world by some interpretations of Revelations, but it seems so right to me. I can imagine Bandit there at the end of the world in his ball charging and then making a U-turn and confusing the bad guys. All right, maybe my version of the images is a bit silly, but have you seen what others have done in Hollywood? We Methodists are not focusing on the end but on the present and future, trying to work together. We are not here to blame, exclude, or preach doom. We are here for the Good News.

When the world is getting you down or you are thinking about all those dark images. Remember God put hamsters at Megiddo. Think of them in little balls doing U-turns confusing the bad guys. If that does not help then maybe have some food and a little chat with your fellow Methodists. We are in this journey together.

Thank you for allowing me to fill in and share with you. Amen.