

(orchestra music)

Narrator: It is wonderful that so many of you brave the elements to come for divine worship today. I think if we were physically to revisit Sams Creek, we might very well be able to go skating on it this morning. The sermon today is about the Methodist Church in the United States. If this announcement comes as an unexpected jolt to some of you who regularly worship in this interdenominational chapel, let me ask you to bear with me for a few minutes I shall explain why I am doing it. And perhaps I should even justify the doing of it. The occasion for this sermon is the celebration in this year in 1966 of the 200th anniversary of the establishment of the first Methodist Church in the United States. In the year 1766, Robert Strawbridge came from Ireland, organized a congregation of 15 Methodists and built them a log church on Sams Creek in Maryland, a spot now less than an hour's drive north of the nation's capital. Hence the celebration this year of the second Centennial of Methodism in America and hence this sermon. That then is the occasion one of the explanation, why in an interdenominational chapel, should we have a sermon dealing with a particular denomination, precisely because this is an interdenominational chapel, not a non denominational chapel. It's congregation, it's choir, it's ushers, it's musicians, it's ministers, it's preachers, hostesses, maid and janitor are all members of particular denominational churches. From time to time, we singled out a particular denomination for special attention so that all of us might be aware of the contribution, which that member of the body of Christ is making to the whole body. For instance, on October the 24th, less than three months ago, the Methodist Dean of the Duke Divinity School from this pulpit fired a 21 gun homiletical salute to the reformation, which is now taking place within the Roman Catholic Church, and so it goes. But there is an exceptional justification for taking a look now at the Methodist Church on the occasion of its second Centennial, three reasons. The first reason is that Mr. James B. Duke, who founded this university was himself a Methodist. And he credited the Methodist Church with giving him the inspiration, the vision and the encouragement, which led to his magnificent deed. There are many evidences of the influence of Methodism upon Mr. Duke, but let me summarize the matter by quoting a portion of an address given by the late judge William R. Perkins, the father of the present chairman of the Duke Endowment. Judge Perkins was the personal legal counsel of Mr. Duke. And he knew him intimately. And in this address, which was given exactly four years after Mr. Duke's death, Judge Perkins explained the motives and purposes which Mr. Duke had in setting up the endowment. And here are his words. According to Mr. Duke's plan, the objects of the endowment may be conveniently classified as religion, hospitalization, and education. To appreciate the provisions for religion, one must realize that Mr. Duke was a Methodist of the rural district type and such had been his father and his grandfather before him. And the first rate type it was and is. The circuit rider had entered deeply into the warp and woof of their lives. Mr. Duke, often remarked, "My old daddy always said that if he amounted to anything at all in this world, it was due to the Methodist circuit riders." To which he, James B. Duke invariably added, "If I amount to anything in this world, I owe it all to my daddy and to the Methodist Church." The second factor contributing to this special justification for a sermon at Duke on Methodism has to do with the financial support, which the Methodist Church has voluntarily given to the university through the years. The church does not own the university. It is privately owned by its own board

of trustees. The church does not control or hold the veto power over the Duke administration. No bishop, nor all the bishops together, no church board or all the boards acting in concert can countermand the actions of the President of Duke University or the trustees. Yet the church which began on Sams Creek gives Duke University a substantial sum of money each year for faculty salaries, for the erection of new buildings. The current rate of giving is in excess of \$200,000 a year. No other denomination gives Duke a dime. There is no record that any other church as such has ever given the university as such any operating or capital funds at any time. The third and final reason for a special look at Methodism here has to do with the so-called fifth decade plans. I'm sure it is no secret to you, and we hope no secret to anyone in the United States that this university is now engaged in the greatest development program in its entire history so far. After years of careful planning and projection by groups of the faculty, the administration, students, trustees, alumni, a goal was fixed and an ambitious campaign was launched. The immediate and crucial objective was announced as the securing of \$102,876,000 from anyone and everyone who will contribute. Now, this was not a campaign thrust upon the university by any outside group. It was so to speak an inside job. Something else was an inside job. The selection of the man upon whom the university will depend to lead us to victory without any other criterion than that of proven ability and demonstrated interest in Duke University. The university itself selected six men who would lead the overall campaign and its five subdivisions. There was no deliberate attempt to pick Methodists, but five of the six men whom the university chose happened to be Methodists. Only one of the six happens to be an active layman in one of our sister denominations. Therefore in summary, we believe that at Duke, there is special justification for a focus upon the 200th anniversary of the Methodist Church in America. Because Methodism has played a decisive role in the university's founding. It continues to give something more than token financial support and most of the key leaders in our great fifth decade campaign received their spiritual nourishment in the Methodist Church today. What conclusion should we draw from this? What does it all mean? That Methodist students at Duke should be given better grades in chemistry than Baptist students. That the Methodist should be given preferred seats at the home basketball games. That Methodist professors should be given higher salaries than Presbyterian professors. That Methodist Forge should be given better campus parking places than Episcopalian Cadillac's. Well, merely to express these questions in words is to reveal the impossibility and certainly the undesirability of preferential treatment of Methodism on this intentionally interdenominational campus. What then, should we conclude from the fact that the Methodist Church has played and will continue to play a decisive role in the fortunes of this university. The only conclusion which I care to press this morning is that the students and faculty who have and will benefit so largely from the influence of American Methodism, should take a little time to become knowledgeable about that church. How much time they should spend and how knowledgeable they should become, I do not care to indicate. I've only asked for 25 minutes this morning. But I do suggest that enough time be spent in study that is free from negative bias, at least to dispel the worst misconceptions which some academicians have about Methodism. The actual shortcomings and the genuine weaknesses of Methodist people and of the Methodist Church are bad enough. They do not need to be made to appear worse than they are by a distortion and outright fabrication. Now, let me briefly indicate therefore a few of the areas in which American Methodism has made distinct contributions and about which you might wish to inform yourself. I shall mention some of the postures that has taken that have been characteristic. Now you may agree or disagree with those postures, as you learn more about them. The first characteristic of American Methodism, which I should like to mention is, its interest in education, including higher education. John Wesley, the English founder of

Methodism once declared the Methodist may be poor, but there is no need they should be ignorant. And Francis Asbury, who was the greatest leader of early American Methodism, agreed with Wesley on this point. And he began by educating himself at very great sacrifice. And indeed he drafted plans for a Methodist school only 14 years after Strawbridge organized the first congregation on Sams Creek. By the time the American Methodists were ready to hold their very first general conference Asbury together with Dr. Thomas Koch, who was an Oxford graduate, had already laid the plans for a college and had collected some of the funds for it. Interestingly enough, at the end of the first of these two centuries of American Methodism, it was reported that the American Methodist Church had founded nearly 300 schools and colleges. I think you would be interested to know the names of some of today's leading universities, which owe their existence to American Methodism. The University of Southern California, Vanderbilt University, Syracuse, Northwestern, Boston, Emory, Duke, SMU, Wesleyan, The University of Denver, Lawrence University, Southwestern University, and a host of other universities and colleges, some of which rank very high in national ratings. Now, since the membership of the Methodist Church is only about 5% of the total population in this country, it is easy to see that this denomination has provided the nation with a disproportionately large share of the opportunities for higher education. But having founded these universities and colleges, having given them financial support, the Methodist Church has by and large adopted an attitude of trust and cooperation towards them. And it has not sought to dictate their policies, rather leaving to the trustees and the administration, the complex decisions which must be made from week to week and from day to day. And indeed some of the universities and colleges, which were given birth by American Methodism now have no official kinship at all with their parents. Now, this first characteristic is in harmony with another distinguishing feature of this denomination. I speak now of a policy which Wesley described by the phrase think, and let think, hard and fast creedal statements have never been apart of Methodism nor have neatly refined theological postulations been the basis of membership. The governing principle has been, think and let think. I say this has been the governing principle, not the unanimous behavior of Methodists. Here and there one will encounter a misplaced Methodist with a barnacle brain who is willing neither to think nor to let think. For him the very thought of thinking is unthinkable. But by and large, the Methodist Church has allowed and even encouraged great latitude on matters of doctrine and practice. Now it's important to remember at this point that the emphasis is upon tolerance rather than indifference. The Methodist Church believes doctrines are extremely important and that every Christian should earnestly strive to know the truth of God. But when one has a faith, which he cherishes even more than life itself, he is in the best position to understand how much another's beliefs can mean to him, and therefore to be tolerant. The Methodist Church insist that all its ministers be thoroughly grounded in biblical studies and in theology. In the application of the Bible and theology to the secular life of man. Some of the nation's most outstanding theologians and biblical scholars are Methodists. I should omit calling any names, but scholars of every denomination know this to be true. And now speaking of other denominations, perhaps this is as good a time as any for me to say that Methodism is not unique in any point of strength, which I shall mention or not mention. And unfortunately in most of the weaknesses of Methodism are also shared by one or more of her sister denominations. I want now to mention a third characteristic of American Methodism, that is its historic insistence, that the gospel of Jesus Christ has an escapable implications for the social relations of mankind. Private piety is necessary, but by itself is not enough. No area of secular life has been exempt from the scrutiny and interference of some Methodist bishop or board. Often these activities have encountered their very strongest opposition from within the denomination itself, but the church has nevertheless forged

ahead. For instance, a Methodist bishop marches from Selma to Montgomery. A group of Methodist Churches unite with Baptist to throw whiskey stores out of a county. A Methodist preacher uses his pulpit to expose rampant corruption in city government. Another Methodist preacher is threatened with contempt of court proceedings because he criticizes a judge for his persistent refusal to sentence proven racketeers. A Methodist missionary is ejected from Angola because he declared that colonial exploitation should give way to democracy, that there should not be taxation without representation. Now, the one theme which runs through all of these activities, which not all Methodists would agree with in particular, but with which Methodists do agree on the theme. And that is the insistence that the gospel has secular implications that God cannot be shut up within the four walls of the church and that his will touches all of life. Now because of this emphasis, Methodists have sometimes been accused of being activists and do gooders. They have been accused of leaving off the preaching of the gospel and meddling in affairs, which were none of their business. Only God knows for sure whether some of these accusations have been partially true. But Methodism has always felt that it must in God's name, get involved wherever human needs are at stake. It has been willing to experiment to try and fail, to try again in a different way. The Methodist missionary program experimented with short term missionaries. And this pattern was later borrowed by Peace Corps. The Methodist Church tried financing an interdenominational chaplaincy in the Duke Hospital. This idea is catching on. The Methodist division of higher education gave Duke a \$25,000 grant simply to support some Latin American ventures that Duke was interested in. Our Project Nicaragua has been partially supported by that grant. The point is that the denomination is willing to experiment to try new ways to make the will of God real in God's world. It may fail. It may miss the point. It may be criticized, but it will keep trying. And now last but not least, American Methodism has been characterized by an emphasis upon the importance of every person, having a vital relationship to the living God. Nothing will take the place of that, in the Methodist view. They have taught that correctness of form in public worship is an unacceptable substitute for this, however valuable that may be in itself. Methodists have insisted that membership in a correct church or orthodoxy of creed and intellectual belief cannot be an acceptable substitute for a personal relationship with a personal God. Therefore the great thrust of American Methodism and its witness has been against deism, formalism, institutionalism, and coldness in religion. The representative Methodist has a warm hearted religious faith, which proclaims God as Father and Jesus Christ as the living Lord. The God is dead churchman have not found fertile soil in Methodist vineyards. Dr. J Robert Nelson, a distinguished Methodist theologian who formerly incidentally was director of the Western Foundation at Chapel Hill represented most Methodists in an article he recently published in the Christian Century. He noted that the three professors who are conducting a prolonged funeral of God, profess and attraction to Jesus. And yet their descriptions of Jesus, he says are conflicting and especially fanciful. And here are his words. "None is the real Jesus of biblical witness and Christian faith. Apart from the living Lord, whom Jesus called Father and whom he represents in person word and deed, there is just no real Jesus Christ who can be known or addressed by a faith properly called Christian." Well, the living God through Jesus Christ, beckons all men to draw near to him. He does not compel them to come as Methodist see it, and some do not come. Methodist theology has held that some men will not be saved, exclusively because they declined to accept the free gift of grace, which God offers them through Jesus Christ. And it has held that some men will be saved again exclusively because they accept the free gift of grace. Methodist theologians and preachers almost unanimously have rejected the unbiblical narcotic that all will be saved regardless. Methodist preachers and teachers have taught that nobody is going to be forcibly dragged into the kingdom of God while kicking and

screaming in rebellion against it. All may come, none will be compelled. None are predestined either to salvation or to perdition, but anyone who chooses the salvation freely offered in Christ will be accepted. For the past 200 years, one of the favorite texts for sermons and Methodist pulpits stretching from Sams Creek Western has been the one read by Jack Wilson this morning. The words of Christ, I will give unto him that is a thirst of the fountain of the water of life freely and let him that is a thirst come and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely. Heavenly Father, whatever our church preference or membership may be, each one of us now accepts the free gift of grace. We take from thee, the water of life. Granted we may walk in fellowship with Jesus Christ and with one another of every persuasion, all the days of our lives. And now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.