

# “Social Holiness: Our Wesleyan DNA”

Sermon preached At Foundry United Methodist Church

By Rev. Dean Snyder  
October 5, 2003 World Communion Sunday

Scripture: Jeremiah 8: 18-22

*Book of Discipline: Nurture and Mission of the Church—Finally, we emphasize the nurturing and serving function of Christian fellowship in the Church. The personal experience of faith is nourished by the worshiping community.*

*For Wesley there is no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness. The communal forms of faith in the Wesleyan tradition not only promote personal growth; they also equip and mobilize us for mission and service to the world.*

*The outreach of the church springs from the working of the Spirit. As United Methodists, we respond to that working through a connectional polity based upon mutual responsiveness and accountability. Connectional ties bind us together in faith and service in our global witness, enabling faith to become active in love and intensifying our desire for peace and justice in the world.*

*--"Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases," p. 47-48*

In Dublin, Ireland, on July 2, 1789, when he was 86 years old, less than two years before his death, John Wesley completed the writing of a sermon that he had been brooding about for some time.

By most people's standards John Wesley's life would have seemed to be a remarkable success. His early career as an Anglican priest had been shaky and troubled, but at 35 years of age John Wesley had, by the grace of God, turned his life and ministry around. He had begun a movement that had grown dramatically throughout the British empire. It had spread to America where it had become the largest church in the new nation at the time. He was one of the most widely published authors of his day. He was an outspoken and respected critic of slavery, war and economic policies that he believed caused poverty.

But now, an old man, visiting the Methodist society in Dublin, he was asking himself hard questions about his own life and his life's work.

He never gave the sermon he finished writing at 86 years of age in Dublin on July 2, 1789, a title.<sup>1</sup> But his text was Jeremiah 8:22: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?"

The question he was asking himself was, if the Methodist movement he had begun was so successful, as it was, why wasn't the world a better place? In his sermon he asks this question: "Why has Christianity done so little good, even among us? Even among the Methodists?"

This sermon that John Wesley wrote, when he was an old man, contemplating the significance of his own life's work, is a window into his deepest beliefs. For John Wesley, the measure of the success of a minister, of a church, of a spiritual movement, of his own dearly beloved Methodism wasn't the number of members who joined the church, or the quantity and size of buildings the church owned, or the size of its budget, or its status at Parliament and Buckingham Palace.

The measure of Methodism's success was whether the world was a better place, a more just place, a more compassionate place, and he felt that Methodism had accomplished much less than it should have.

John Wesley taught Methodists three rules about money (this was one of his mantras): "Earn all you can; Save all you can; Give all you can." In his Dublin sermon, written when he was 86 years old, he said that most Methodists had learned well the first rule, "Earn all you can. Some had learned the second, "Save all you can." But few had learned the third.

John Wesley, as an old man, measured finally the success of his movement not by the size of its membership rolls or treasuries but by whether it had made the world a better place, and specifically by whether the poor had been helped and poverty had been lessened.

He was so concerned for the poor that as an old man in his 80s, John Wesley would still sometimes walk, 10 hours a day, through the snowy winter streets of London, knocking at the doors of Methodists, collecting for the poor.

Wesley said: "The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness."<sup>2</sup> You cannot be holy except as you are engaged in making the world a better place. You do not become holy by keeping yourself pure and clean from the world but by plunging into ministry on behalf of the world's hurting ones.

Lovett Weems says there were seven areas of social responsibility that John Wesley emphasized in his time: the poor and poverty, slavery, prisons and prisoners, the abuse of hard liquor (grain alcohol), politics, war, and education.<sup>3</sup>

I've been suggesting these last several weeks that some of the spirit of John Wesley and the early Methodists still lives on in our DNA as a church here at Foundry. I hope so. Our calling is not to be a church; it is to heal the world: to be a balm in Gilead, to be a physician to the poor, the enslaved, the imprisoned, the addicted, the oppressed, the victims of violence and those denied access to education.

How do we know if we have been successful as the church of Jesus Christ, as Christians? Well, here are the questions we need to ask: Is our city healed? Is our nation just? Is our world at peace?

“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” (Jeremiah 8:22)

1. The sermon was later given the title “Causes of the Inefficiency of Christianity” (not at all typical of Wesley’s terminology) by someone else. It can be found in Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Editors, "John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology" (Abingdon Press), p. 549-557.
2. Quoted in Lovett H. Weems, Jr., "John Wesley's Message Today" (Abingdon Press), p. 62.
3. Weems, pp. 64-70.