

## “Thick Grace: Our Wesleyan DNA”

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church

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John 1: 6-13

This year is the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Wesley, the Anglican priest who founded Methodism. Today, according to the World Methodist Council, the movement John Wesley began has grown to include 75 million people in 103 denominations in 130 countries of the world.

I am asked from time to time what Methodists believe. Well, the literal answer to this question may be that Methodists believe as many different things as there are Methodists.

Methodism is a part of the universal church that shares a belief in the triune God, Creator, Redeemer, Spirit, and in the mystery of salvation in and through Jesus Christ. The Methodist movement has believed pretty much what most Christians believe.

John Wesley was as interested in debating theology as doing ministry, although he did participate in some of the discussion about the critical theological issues of his day. He believed in the essentials of the Christian faith as taught by the Church of England, but otherwise he wasn't a stickler for theology.

Lovett Weems, in his excellent little book “John Wesley’s Message Today,” says that one of Wesley’s favorite phrases was “think and let think.”<sup>1</sup>

“The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not ... opinions of any sort,” Wesley said. “We think and let think ...”

Wesley didn't invent any new doctrines. Yet, there were distinctive emphases in Wesley's teaching and in the preaching of the early Methodists that, I believe, still influence the character of Methodist churches today.

A number of years ago a study commission worked out a statement for the United Methodist Book of Discipline about doctrine and theology. The commission identified “six distinctive Wesleyan emphases.”

Between now and October I'd like to discuss those six distinctive emphases one by one. These emphases are part of our DNA as a Methodist Church and I am convinced, like the DNA I inherited from my ancestors has, for good or ill, helped shape me, so our Wesleyan DNA, often in subtle ways, still influences our life together.

Here is the first of John Wesley's distinctive emphases: prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace: Literally it means the grace that comes before; that is, grace that comes before we ask for it; grace that comes before we realize we need it; grace that comes before we realize we have received it.

“Salvation begins,” John Wesley said in one of his sermons, “with what is usually termed ... preventing [or prevenient] grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning [God's] will, and the first slight, transient conviction of having sinned against [God].”

“All these imply,” Wesley said, “some tendency toward life, some degree of salvation, the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart ...”<sup>2</sup>

Wesley was optimistic about God’s grace. Wesley was convinced that God was always taking the initiative to reach out toward us. God’s grace is not thin and hard to breath like the atmosphere on a high mountain top, but thick and rich and dense and everywhere, so that we are breathing it in before we even imagine it exists.

John Wesley’s favorite verse, when he preached about prevenient grace, was John 1: 9: “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

The true light enlightens *everyone*.

“Every [one] has a greater or less measure of this,” Wesley said. Christian and non-Christian alike, he said.<sup>3</sup>

“There is no [one],” he said, “except [those] who have quenched the Spirit, [who] is wholly void of the grace of God.”<sup>4</sup>

Now, for Wesley, this early and universal grace was just the beginning of our relationship with God. Wesley expected that our relationship with God would deepen and we would experience other aspects of God’s grace: forgiveness, release from guilt, a sense of God’s presence with us, freedom from the compulsion to sin, a caring and feeling heart.

But Wesley’s assumption was that God’s grace is everywhere, that it touches every man, woman and child, that God’s light, the true light illumines everyone, fills the earth.

This is not an insignificant thing to believe and affirm. It is no small thing.

It is part of the reason that Methodism has tended to be open to so much that we can learn from the world around us, from the pursuit of human learning, from the sciences and medicine and culture and the arts.

Wesley loved learning. He loved science. He loved medicine. He was fascinated by new theories and ideas. He paid close attention to diet and became a vegetarian. Like Benjamin Franklin, he was fascinated by the medicinal uses of electricity. (I’m not suggesting that he was always right but he was always open.)

This grew from his conviction that God’s grace is present in the natural world. It is present in the university. It is present in secular learning.

God has not abandoned the world to let it go to hell. There is something of the true light shining everywhere.

Now let me be clear that John Wesley was not a plaster saint. He was something of a fanatic. He was compulsive and irrationally driven and sometimes out of touch with his own feelings. The new biography of Wesley by the British politician-turned-writer Roy Hattersley entitled “A Brand from the Burning: The Life of John Wesley” shows that there were ways in which Wesley was, well, strange.

In his review of Hattersley’s book in the Washington Post this summer, Stewart Weaver says, no matter how great he was and how much good he did, Wesley was obviously “a terribly lonely, sexually naive, emotionally stunted man.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet, even though Wesley tended toward fanaticism and began a new Christian movement, he never became a sectarian. He was always catholic in spirit. He did not disdain the world; he did not disdain tradition; he did not turn his back on learning or culture.

He was an optimist about the grace of God and, thus, an optimist about humanity.

I think I have learned the most about the spirit of Methodism by visiting Methodist churches in other parts of the world, especially Africa and especially Zimbabwe.

The Methodist church in Zimbabwe is alive and energetic, and it means something special there to be a Methodist. Methodists in Zimbabwe are very spiritual and pious. They believe profoundly in the power of prayer, and will sometimes pray through the night.

At the same time they believe passionately in the power of education and science and technology and learning. There is not great divide between piety and learning, between religion and science, between the sacred and the secular.

The true light we meet in Jesus Christ is also in the world around us enlightening everyone.

This is very Wesleyan. This is very Methodist.

Much of what Wesley taught he learned the hard way, through his own faith struggle, which was intense and often agonizing.

He found it very difficult to experience and accept God's love.

When he was a student he was part of a Christian fellowship at Oxford. It was there that Wesley and other members of the group were first called Methodists, because they were so methodical about practicing their faith.

They made long lists of practices that they would covenant to in order to live out their faith ... getting up at 5 a.m. every day for prayer, regular communion, confession, alms, working with the poor and visiting in prison.

Still, in spite of his intense religious discipline, Wesley did not experience a sense of peace.

He went to get advice from the Anglican preacher and teacher William Law, who said to him, "John, John, you are trying to make Christianity complicated and difficult, when really it is a very simple thing."

Law said: "All Christianity can be summed up in this: 'We love because God first loved us.'" (I John 4: 19)

This became one of Wesley's distinctive emphases. God's love is not rare and difficult to find. It is there before we are ready to receive it, reaching out to us. It fills the world. It is a thick grace.

It touches every man, woman and child. It manifests itself in the light of human learning, in the arts and the sciences, in the pursuit of justice, and in our care and compassion for one another.

"We love because God first loved us." This is our Wesleyan DNA.

1. Lovett H. Weens, Jr., "John Wesley's Message Today" (Abingdon Press), p. 8.
2. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Editors, "John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology" (Abingdon Press), p. 488.
3. Kenneth J. Collins, "The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology" (Abingdon Press) p. 39.
4. Collins, p. 39.
5. Washington Post Book Review (August 3, 2003), p. 4.