

Sunday, Aug. 31, 2003

## Sermon: “The Inner Witness: Our Wesleyan DNA”

Scripture: Romans 8: 12-17

“Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases” (From the United Methodist Book of Discipline)

Justification and Assurance—We believe God reaches out to the repentant believer in justifying grace with accepting and pardoning love. Wesleyan theology stresses that a decisive change in the human heart can and does occur under the prompting of grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In justification we are, through faith, forgiven our sin and restored to God’s favor. This righting of relationships by God through Christ calls forth our faith and trust as we experience regeneration, by which we are made new creatures in Christ.

This process of justification and new birth is often referred to as conversion. Such a change may be sudden and dramatic, or gradual and cumulative. It marks a new beginning, yet it is part of an ongoing process. Christian experience as personal transformation always expresses itself as faith working by love.

Our Wesleyan theology also embraces the scriptural promise that we can expect to receive assurance of our present salvation as the Spirit "bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

John Wesley was 32 years old in 1735, when he and his brother Charles, both Anglican priests, set sail from England for America, to the colony of Georgia, where they intended to serve as missionaries to the American Indians.

John Wesley’s time in Georgia did not go well, personally or professionally. In fact it was a fiasco, an embarrassment. He did not manage to reach one Indian. He did not do well as a priest to the Georgia colonists. He had a failed, confused, and convoluted romance. Roy Hattersley, in his new biography of Wesley, suggests Wesley came close to having something like a nervous breakdown as a result of his ministry in Georgia.<sup>1</sup>

He abandoned Georgia to return to England less than two years after he had arrived there.

Even though it almost destroyed him, this personal and priestly disaster in Wesley’s life turned out to shape, in several critical ways, the Methodist movement which John Wesley was to later begin and lead and help shape.

One of John Wesley’s most important spiritual experiences happened on his way to Georgia, during his almost 5-month journey aboard the sailing ship, the *Simmonds*.

It was a rough crossing. Several times during the voyage, the ship was pummeled by severe Atlantic storms. It scared the dickens out of Wesley.

January was a particularly stormy month. One day in January the sea broke over the surface of the ship and broke through the windows of the cabin where Wesley was and covered him. He was convinced he was going to die.

Later in the month, another storm was so severe that waves broke over the surface of the ship, split the mainsail, and began filling the boat.

Aboard the ship, along with John Wesley and his brothers and their friends and others, were 26 German Moravian Christians, who had left Germany to settle in America to find religious freedom.

While the waves were breaking over the deck of the ship, and everybody else was screaming and wailing, and Wesley was himself panicking, scared to death, expecting to die, the Moravians were conducting their daily worship service.

While all hell was breaking loose among the other passengers, including Wesley, the Moravians continued calmly singing their hymns and praying.

This made a deep and lasting impression on Wesley. Later Wesley asked one of the Moravian leaders whether they had not been afraid. "I thank God, no," he answered.

"Well," Wesley asked, "Weren't your women and children afraid?"

The Moravian replied, "No, our women and children are not afraid to die."

After Wesley's failure in Georgia, after his return to England, his memory of watching the German Moravians fearlessness in the face of death stuck with him. Wesley decided he wanted a faith like that. He wanted to not only believe in his head that he was forgiven and loved by God, he wanted to know it in the depths of his being, like the German Moravians seemed to.

He wanted more than abstract faith; he wanted a knowledge deep within himself of God's forgiveness, love and acceptance, a confidence so profound that he would not be afraid to die.<sup>2</sup>

A few months after John Wesley returned from Georgia to England in 1738 he had a profound religious experience. Some people call it a conversion. After attending a Moravian meeting on Aldersgate Street, he wrote that his heart was "strangely warmed."

"I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins even mine," Wesley wrote in his Journal.

John Wesley became convinced that not only can we be forgiven of our sins but that we can know inside ourselves with confidence God's forgiveness and acceptance and love.

It became known as the Wesleyan teaching of Christian assurance. It was one of Methodism's most controversial teachings. Bishop William Cannon believed that Wesley's teaching on Christian assurance is "Methodism's most distinctive doctrinal characteristic."<sup>3</sup>

This conviction that there is an inner witness, that we can experience and know God's forgiveness, love and

grace inside the depths of our being, is part of our Wesleyan DNA.

The Methodist movement begun by John Wesley, who was born 300 years ago this year, has grown to include 75 million people in 103 denominations in 130 countries. Methodists probably believe as many different things as there are Methodists. We are not a doctrinally rigid movement.

But part of our heritage, part of our DNA, even here at Foundry, is this belief that the love of God is more than an idea, more than an article of faith, more than a theory. It is something we can experience, a reality we can know in our heart of hearts, in the depths of our being.

When John Wesley preached or taught about his belief in Christian assurance, the Scripture he quoted again and again was Romans 8: 16. "... the Spirit bear[s] witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." John Wesley was a scholar. He was an intellectual. He was a thinker. But he longed for a relationship with God that was more than a matter of the intellect. Intellectual understanding was important to Wesley to the day he died, but it was not enough.

Wesley insisted on the possibility of experience. We can *experience* the forgiveness of God. we can *experience* the love of God. We can *know* it.

Wesley was sometimes accused of being a subjectivist: of putting too much emphasis on the internal spiritual life and emotion.

Wesley argued that experience isn't merely subjectivism if there is an objective reality that corresponds to our internal experience. Religious experience is much more than emotion, he said. It is an encounter with an objectively real and true holy God.

Now, let me be quick to say that John Wesley's spiritual life was never easy or secure. He struggled again and again with a sense of spiritual inadequacy. He experienced intimacy with God, but he also experienced distance.

In his 60s, during a time of depression, he was still writing about bouts of spiritual self-defeat in letters to his brother: "I do not love God. I never did ... I am only an honest heathen," he wrote during one of his times of depression.<sup>4</sup>

Wesley's conviction that we can experience an inward witness and assurance of God's forgiveness and love did not mean that we would never experience times of spiritual abandonment and defeat.

Let me also add that when some overly enthusiastic Methodists tried to make this experience of assurance a test of salvation, Wesley set limits on them.

A "consciousness" of God's forgiveness and love is, he said, "a common privilege of Christians" but, to believe this, does not mean that there aren't exceptions. This teaching should not be used to exclude people from the community of grace.<sup>5</sup>

As Wesley was well aware, this is a teaching easily abused in many ways. Still, there is within it something very Methodist.

Methodism has a bias toward experiential spirituality. Wesley encourages us to open ourselves to the love of God ... to let it enter us and speak to us and warm us. There are times when God and the experience of

God's love is absent, but don't expect those times to last forever, Wesley says. Don't be afraid of the experience of God's indwelling presence. Don't be afraid to hear the voice of God speak inside. Trust your gut.

Part of our Methodist DNA is this: our relationship with God is more than a matter of ritual and legality and duty.

It is personal. It is profound. It is real.

1. Roy Hattersley, "A Brand from the Burning: The Life of John Wesley" (Doubleday), p. 124.
2. Kenneth J. Collins, "John Wesley and the Fear of Death as a Standard of Conversion," in "Conversion in the Wesleyan Experience" (Abingdon Press), p. 58-59.
3. Quoted by Lovett H. Weems, Jr., "John Wesley's Message Today" (Abingdon Press), p. 34.
1. Kenneth J. Collins, "The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology" (Abingdon Press) p. 144.
4. Weems, p. 35.