

Sunday, Sept. 14, 2003

“Habitually Filled: Our Wesleyan DNA”

Scripture: Philippians 3: 12-16

Reading from the United Methodist Book of Discipline:

Sanctification and Perfection—We hold that the wonder of God’s acceptance and pardon does not end God’s saving work, which continues to nurture our growth in grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor.

New birth is the first step in this process of sanctification. Sanctifying grace draws us toward the gift of Christian perfection, which Wesley described as a heart "habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor" and as "having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked."

This gracious gift of God’s power and love, the hope and expectation of the faithful, is neither warranted by our efforts nor limited by our frailties.

--“Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases,” p. 47

Mike Slaughter is the pastor of a United Methodist church in Ginghamburg, Ohio. When he was sent to be the church’s pastor in 1979, it had an average attendance in worship of 90 people. Today attendance is about 3,000 people, in small-town Ohio. More than that, it is a church deeply engaged in mission, working intently with disadvantaged youth in Dayton.

But the path, Mike says, from 90 to 3,000 has not been smooth. The path to engagement in mission has not been smooth.

Ask Mike Slaughter what his spiritual gifts are, and you know what he will tell you? What spiritual gift has he deployed that has helped his church to grow so dramatically in size and, even more importantly, in mission?

Mike will tell you that the most valuable spiritual gift that he has been given by God is the gift of irritation.¹ The spiritual gift of being irritating. His spiritual gift is “to afflict the comfortable.” To keep God’s people from becoming comfortable. It is what has caused his church to grow spiritually, numerically and missionally, and to keep growing. Whenever people start getting comfortable there, Mike irritates them.

This is very Methodist. Methodists are an irritating people. Methodism has never been a very comfortable movement. There is something at the core of this movement that keeps irritating us.

John Wesley, the Anglican priest who began Methodism, was born 300 years ago in 1703. The movement he began has now grown to include 75 million people in 103 denominations in 130 countries of the world. There are a lot of things all these Methodists do not agree on.

Yet, we share a common DNA. It has helped shape us. Even though we have our share of disagreements with many of the other 75 million Methodists on the face of the earth today, and even sometimes among ourselves, this DNA, which goes back to John Wesley and the early Methodists, has helped shape Foundry Church. We are grateful for all our members from various religious backgrounds. Foundry is blessed to have many Lutheran-Methodist, Catholic-Methodist, Baptist-Methodist, you-name-it-Methodist members. Yet, collectively we have been shaped, for good and ill, by our Wesleyan DNA.

There is something at the core of our movement that keeps us from getting too comfortable. Like Mike Slaughter, Methodism has the spiritual gift of irritation.

John Wesley believed in and taught the possibility of “Christian Perfection.” The Wesleyan scholar Albert Outler says Christian Perfection came to be the most distinctive and also the most widely misunderstood of all Wesley’s teaching.² Even though other Christian leaders in 18th century England, found the idea of Christian Perfection irritating, Wesley kept teaching it. John Wesley had the spiritual gift of irritation.

The verse of Scripture John Wesley loved to quote when he taught about Christian perfection was Philippians 3: 12: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

I press on ... never quite satisfied ... seeking to keep growing ... seeking greater maturity ... pressing on to perfection ... convinced I can make it ... not a fantasy, not a wish dream ... I press on ... never fully comfortable ... never quite satisfied ... the gift of irritation.

John Wesley, when he admitted his preachers into ministry, asked them a series of questions: One question was: “Are you going on to perfection?” Another was “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?”

When they ordain United Methodist ministers, our bishops still ask these questions today.

“Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?” Bishop James Mace Ault asked me when I was

ordained and received into the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. I answered “yes,” but I wasn’t really being entirely truthful.

Do I really expect to become perfectly loving in this lifetime? Ask Jane what she thinks the likelihood of that is.

But I take John Wesley’s point. If I don’t expect to be made perfect in this life, the problem isn’t God’s; it is my own lack of faith.

The possibilities we believe in matter. If we don’t believe in the possibility of perfect love for ourselves, then we are unlikely to believe in the possibility of perfect justice in the world around us, or in the possibility of perfect peace. We settle. The possibilities we believe in matters.

According to Newsweek, after September 11, 2001, a number of leading government officials read the writings of a brilliant political philosopher Victor Davis Hanson. Hanson believes that violence and war is the natural condition of humanity. “War is terrible but innate to civilization,” he writes.² “War is a tragedy innate to the human condition.”

Newsweek writer Evan Thomas suggested in an essay published last March in Newsweek that this conviction about the impossibilities of peace is, at least in part, responsible for the preemptive war policy we instituted in Iraq.³ If violence and war is innate and inevitable, then why not do it first and better?

I don’t know if Newsweek is right about our political leaders’ philosophy, but I think it illustrates the truth that what we believe about the possibilities of life matters.

John Wesley planted within Methodism a bias toward the possibility of perfection – perfect love, perfect justice, perfect peace. We ought to believe in it, long for it, be irritated about anything less.

“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal,” John Wesley says, “but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”

There are two things I want to say about this strain of perfectionism in our Wesleyan DNA ... two

qualifications about this idea of Christian perfection, lest we misunderstand it.

First, the goal is not a rigid, external, moralistic perfection. “By perfection,” Wesley said, “I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and [others] ruling all the tempers, words, and actions the whole heart by the whole life.”⁴

There are no external standards by which we can measure our growth toward perfection of love. “Going on to perfection” cannot be measured by external yardsticks.

In 1900, Lovett Weems says, at a national gathering of a major Protestant denomination, a delegate offered the following categories of sinful activities: cigarette smoking, Coca-Cola guzzling, card-playing, novel reading, dancing, opera, grand opera, living pictures, tableaux, charades, prize fights, bull fights, dog fights, cock fights, yachting, roller skating, football, baseball, curling, backgammon, billiards, checkers, chess, dice, polo, croquet, pool, golf, lawn tennis, cricket, one o’cat, and shinney.⁵ Avoid these 32 things and you achieve perfection? Were we to try to compose our lists, they would look just as silly.

My goal of perfection may not look like yours, except for this: at the heart of it is learning to love.

Secondly, the way we move toward perfection is not just by trying harder. John Wesley loved to preach on Philippians 2: 12-13: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for [God’s] good pleasure.”

Miss either half of this equation and we have missed the point: “Work out your own salvation.” If we leave it at that, as a matter of our own will and efforts, we miss the point. “God ... is at work in you.” Leave it at that, and we also miss the point.

Our spiritual growth toward becoming more closely perfect in our ability to love happens when we want it and when God works inside us to turn our cold, stony hearts into hearts of flesh.

Christian Perfection, Wesley said, is a heart "habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor."⁶

The way we grow spiritually is by letting God’s spirit fill us.

We are not very comfortable here at Foundry. We have been given the spiritual gift of irritation. We are not comfortable with our own spiritual lives. We need to go deeper.

And it is not just about spirituality. We are not comfortable with the world we live in.

We are not comfortable that hungry homeless men and women live on the streets of this city, sleep on the steps sometimes of this very church. We are not comfortable that families go without healthcare and children go without daycare.

We are not comfortable with cancer and AIDS. We are not comfortable with global hunger and disease. We are not comfortable with war.

We are not comfortable with racism, and sexism, and homophobia and xenophobia.

This is in our blood. This is in our DNA. We don't come here into God's presence to be comfortable. We come so that God will keep irritating us until we become perfect, by God's grace, in love for God, self and others.

1. Mike Slaughter, "Your 15 Minutes," a sermon found at <http://www.ginghamsburg.org/sermon00/feb0600a.htm>.
2. Victor Davis Hanson, "An Autumn of War" (Anchor Books), p. xv, 64.
3. Evan Thomas and others, Newsweek, March 31, 2003, p. 54
4. Kenneth J. Collins, "The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology" (Abingdon Press) p. 175.
5. Lovett H. Weens, Jr., "John Wesley's Message Today" (Abingdon Press), p. 57.
6. "The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church" (United Methodist Publishing House), p. 47.