

Sunday, Sept. 21, 2003

Sermon: "A Working Faith: Our Wesleyan DNA"

Scripture: Galatians 4: 12-20

Book of Discipline: Faith and Good Works—We see God's grace and human activity working together in the relationship of faith and good works. God's grace calls forth human response and discipline.

Faith is the only response essential for salvation. However, the General Rules remind us that salvation evidences itself in good works. For Wesley, even repentance should be accompanied by "fruits meet for repentance," or works of piety and mercy.

Both faith and good works belong within an all-encompassing theology of grace, since they stem from God's gracious love "shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

--"Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases," p. 47

John Wesley, the father of the Methodist churches, was born in 1703 -- 300 years ago this year -- and we have been thinking about his life, and his ministry, and the unconventional movement he began that turned into, well, us.

It is my suspicion that, for good or ill, something of John Wesley's spirit and the spirit of the Methodist revival that swept England in the 1700s lives on in us today. It is part of our DNA and shapes us in ways we may not fully understand.

And one of the ways it shapes us, I suspect, is this struggle that Wesley and the early Methodists had with the question: What must we do to be saved?

When he began the movement that was to be known as Methodism, John Wesley was an unhappy man. He was a young Anglican priest who suffered from spiritual anxiety. I don't think I exaggerate much when I say that he was obsessively anxious about his sexual feelings, he was obsessively afraid to die, and he was obsessively afraid of God's judgment.

He was also obsessive in the practice of his religion. He was obsessive about his prayer disciplines. He was obsessive about his participation in Holy Communion. He was obsessive about confessing his sins. He was obsessive about works of charity.

Roy Hattersley, the former British member of parliament who has recently written an amazing frank biography about Wesley's life, says that during this period of his life John Wesley's real center of interest was John Wesley. He was dramatically self-absorbed.¹

Then, at 35 years of age John Wesley had a profound religious experience. After worshipping with a group of German Moravians, German pietists, mystics really, who believed in a deeply felt, inward spirituality, he finally experienced a sense of God's forgiveness as he never had before. It happened in a chapel on Aldersgate Street in London.

It used to be a special Sunday on Methodist church calendars ... a Methodist feast day called Aldersgate

Sunday. The Sunday closest to May 24th, the day John Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed."

"I felt my heart strangely warmed," John Wesley wrote about the experience in his Journal. "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine."

So, May 24, 1738 is often heralded as the day the Methodist movement was born. And ever since, Methodists, all 75 million of us in 103 different denominations in 130 different countries, we have been known as a religion of the "strangely warmed heart" with an emphasis upon deeply felt religious experience.

Except this is really only part of the story. And the rest of the story is critically important to understanding our Methodist DNA.

The late Albert Outler, the most authoritative Wesleyan scholar, said that John Wesley's mystical Aldersgate experience really did not heal his spiritual anxiety.

Even after Aldersgate Wesley's Journals are full of his struggles with anxiety, security, and futility. It was not until almost a year later, April 2, 1739 that Wesley's spiritual doubts and despairs began to lessen, although they would reoccur from time to time throughout his life. But it was really after April 2, 1739, Albert Outler claims, that Wesley began to find something like spiritual peace.²

Here's what happened on April 2, 1739. One of John Wesley's friends from college was an evangelist who preached to the poor throughout England and America: George Whitfield. Today we'd call him a Presbyterian.

George Whitfield had been trying for some time to persuade John Wesley to join in his evangelistic efforts. Finally, John agreed to come to Bristol, England, to preach to the poor coal miners of Bristol.

Coal mining was the most undesirable job available to anybody in 18th century England. They and their families lived in abject poverty. They were considered dirty and dishonest and violent. They were not welcomed in respectable Anglican churches.

George Whitfield preached to the coal miners in an open field in Bristol. Good respectable Anglicans considered this an embarrassingly tacky thing to do.

Every once in a while, walking home from church, when I pass by the Metro Center Metro stop there will be some street preachers waving their Bibles standing on a platform preaching their heart out to whomever will stop and listen for a few minutes.

The idea of John Wesley preaching in an open field to coal miners in Bristol would be something like the equivalent of you getting off the Metro Center stop and seeing me standing on that platform, waving my Bible and preaching to passers-by.

But on April 2, 1739 John Wesley agreed to preach in the fields of Bristol. This is what he wrote in his Journal: "At four in the afternoon [April 2nd] I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the [Bristol] highways the glad tidings of salvation ... to about 3,000 people."³

This is what Albert Outler says about Wesley's decision to preach to the poor coal miners of Bristol: "Up to this point the story is full of anxiety, insecurity, futility. Hereafter, the instances of spiritual disturbances drop off sharply and rarely recur, even in the full records of a very candid man."⁴

It is really when John Wesley made a decision “to be more vile” (an interesting choice of words) and to reach out to the poor, to identify himself with the poor by preaching in the fields of Bristol so that his career as a proper Anglican priest would be ruined forever, only then did Wesley finally begin to experience the sense of salvation and forgiveness and peace that he had been seeking so desperately.

It was his immersion into ministry with the poor that finally got John Wesley off the center stage of his own life. It was ministry with the poor that freed John Wesley from his own spiritual obsessions.

Unless you know this it is hard to understand Wesley. It is hard to understand the Methodist movement. It may be hard to understand Foundry.

Like all Christianity, Wesley believed that we are saved by faith. We are saved by the free gift of God’s love. We cannot do anything to earn or merit God’s love and salvation. It is a gift. It is grace.

But Wesley talked so much about the importance of works of mercy for the poor and about works of righteousness or justice that people thought he believed that we were saved by our works. The truth, I think, is that Wesley’s teachings were confusing.

We are saved by faith, he’d say. Works aren’t necessary for salvation, but, he’d add, they are necessary for “full salvation.”⁵ What does that mean?

Well, here’s what I think: John Wesley believed intellectually in salvation by faith. Experientially, it was only when he committed himself to ministry with and among the poor that he found salvation.

John Wesley participated in debates about theology and doctrine from time to time, but it wasn’t where his heart was. We aren’t saved by our theology. “God will not cast [a person] into everlasting fire ... because his ideas are not clear, or because his conceptions are confused,” he wrote.

But, he said, we “are expressly commanded to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. If you can and do not ... you shall go into everlasting fire.”⁶

Well, you see, it was his ministry among the poor that finally calming the pain in John Wesley’s heart.

We are saved by faith. Faith is all it takes to get us to heaven. But, experientially, we cannot sit in the midst of a world of hunger, poverty, disease, and hopelessness and escape the hell in our hearts unless we do something.

It is the reason, our choir and our AIDS Mission group work so hard every year to do our AIDS concert. It is the reason our youth go to Appalachia every summer. ASP is such a powerful experience because it gets teenagers off the center stage of their own lives.

It is the reason our Walk-In Mission team spends most of their Fridays here ministering to the homeless of our city, who come here, they tell us, because they are treated with a respect here they don’t experience at many other places.

It is the reason for our Hunger Mission Group, and our Peace With Justice Mission Group, and our Human Rights Mission Group, and our WIN Mission Group.

It is the reason we keep plugging away to keep our Child Development Center open. Cuts in Human Service funding are almost killing our Child Development Center, and other funding is almost impossible to find. But our CDC board keeps plugging away. We can’t turn our backs on the children.

This is the spirit of John Wesley in our DNA. We would not have to do any of these things to get into heaven. We are not saved by these works of mercy and justice.

But we've got to do them to escape the hell in our hearts.

We've got to get ourselves off the center stage of our lives and serve others ... the poor, the homeless, the children ... not to be saved, but to be sane.

They accused John Wesley of being a zealot. It was not a compliment. It would be the equivalent of being called a fanatic today. So John Wesley preached over and over again a sermon he entitled "On Zeal."⁷

He based it on a very from Galatians 4:18 that he translated: "It is good to be always zealously affected in a good thing."

He began the sermon by admitting that religious zeal, religious fanaticism, has been responsible for great evil, for much shedding of blood, for what today we might call terrorism.

But, he said, we ought to be as zealous for good works as others are for evil. We ought to be as fanatically about doing good as others are for doing harm. We ought, he says, to be zealous ... we ought to be fanatics: fanatics for mercy, fanatics for justice, fanatics for peace, fanatics for love.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said that none of us are saved, really, until all of us are saved. Our salvation comes when we lose ourselves in the salvation of others. This is our DNA.

1. Roy Hattersley, "A Brand from the Burning: The Life of John Wesley" (Doubleday), p. 134.
2. Albert Outler, Editor, "John Wesley" (Oxford University Press), p. 17.
3. Outler, p. 17.
4. Outler, p. 17.
5. Kenneth J. Collins, "The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology" (Abingdon Press), p. 168.
6. Theodore Runyon, "The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today (Abingdon Press), 148.
7. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Editors, "John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology" (Abingdon Press), p. 465-473.