

# “Passionate for Mercy and Justice: Our Wesleyan DNA”

Sermon Preached At Foundry United Methodist Church

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Acts: 4:31-34

Book of Discipline: Mission and Service—We insist that personal salvation always involves Christian mission and service to the world. By joining heart and hand, we assert that personal religion, evangelical witness, and Christian social action are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing.

Scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world.

The General Rules represent one traditional expression of the intrinsic relationship between Christian life and thought as understood within the Wesleyan tradition.

Theology is the servant of piety, which in turn is the ground of social conscience and the impetus for social action and global interaction, always in the empowering context of the reign of God.

--"Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases," p. 47

Micah 6:8 is one of the most beautiful and compelling verses of Scripture.

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?”  
(Micah 6:8)

David Young preached here this summer about the Volunteers In Mission project in Mexico he led, and he used this as one of his texts. Every since David’s sermon I have been brooding on it. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

I understand pretty much the requirement to walk humbly with our God, I think. Humility means you know you don’t have all the answers. We walk humbly with our God because we know that we may well be wrong, even about the things we suppose we are surest of. I may not always be good at it, but I think I understand humility ... walking humbly with our God.

I understand pretty much, I think, the requirement to do justice. As a young man I read, three or four times, over and over, John Rawls' book "A Theory of Justice." It helped me immensely. Rawls' argument is that no society can be perfectly just but that justice requires that inequalities be arranged so that they are to the advantage of the least advantaged.<sup>1</sup>

This is, I believe, consistent with the thrust of Scripture. I may not always be good at it, but I think I understand fairly well what it means to do justice.

Here, then, is where Micah 6:8 has been bothering me ever since this summer. It says to "love mercy."

What does the Lord require of you but to walk humbly with your God, to do justice,... and to love mercy.

This is what has been bothering me: It doesn't say to "do mercy," which I would understand. It doesn't say to be merciful, which I would also understand. It is surely a divine requirement that we be merciful to one another. As someone has said, an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind in the end.

I understand that we ought to practice mercy, but that is not what Micah 6:8 says. It says that God requires us to *love* mercy. To *do* justice, to *walk* humbly, but to *love* mercy.

To not just do mercy but to *love* mercy.

These past several Sundays I have been talking about John Wesley, born 300 years ago this year, and about the early Methodist movement which John Wesley led in 18<sup>th</sup> Century England.

The Methodist movement has grown to include 75 million people in 103 denominations in 130 countries of the world. It has changed over the three centuries since John Wesley's birth, but I suspect that some of the spirit of early Methodism still lives on in the DNA of our churches, including Foundry, and helps shape who we are and what we are about today.

From the very beginning Methodism has had a passionate concern for the poor. Methodism's first building, opened by John Wesley in 1739 when he was 36, was an arsenal which had been almost ruined by an accidental explosion years earlier. Wesley leased it and fixed it up as best he could. It was always in a state of disrepair. Wesley and the Methodists called the converted arsenal "The Foundry."<sup>2</sup>

Wesley leased the Foundry because he wanted a building where Methodists could meet for worship and for study but he also wanted space that would also serve as a center for ministry to the poor.

Richard Heitzenrater says that, over time, Wesley and the early Methodists developed five kinds of programs to serve the poor which they operated out of the Foundry and then tried to replicate throughout England and Ireland:

- 1) Food, clothing and shelter for the most destitute, those unable to work;
- 2) Materials and seed money to start up small businesses or to keep businesses from closing for those who were able to work;
- 3) Schools for the children of the poor;
- 4) Literacy programs for illiterate or nearly illiterate adults; and
- 5) Free medical clinics for the poor.<sup>3</sup>

John Wesley was always taking special offerings, whenever Methodists met, to assist the poor. Charles Wesley, John's brother, once wrote a letter complaining about this to a friend:

“How many collections think you has my brother made between Thursday evening and Sunday? No fewer than seven. Five this one day from the same poor exhausted people. He has no mercy on them.”<sup>4</sup>

Charles, in his letter, goes on to suggest that if John keeps taking this many offerings for the poor, somebody is going to have to take collection to help the people in the Methodist congregations who themselves will have no money left!

The reason John Wesley could get away with this is because he himself gave so much money away that he was always living on the edge of poverty. His hair was shoulder length because he gave money away rather than paying for a hair cut. He ate the same food from the same table that the homeless were fed at in the Foundry. He quit drinking tea because he felt it was a waste of money since tea has no nutritional value (although he did not feel this way about wine and sherry).<sup>5</sup> Wesley himself was always on the brink of bankruptcy because he gave whatever he got away to the poor.

But John Wesley and the early Methodists did not do this out of some sense of duty or religious obligation, alone. They did it because they loved mercy.

The section of the Book of Discipline about “Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases” put a lot of emphasis on the relationship between personal salvation and social action.

Our social action is centered in our own experience of God's mercy for us. “We love,” John Wesley insisted, “because God first loved us.” (I John 4: 19)

We are merciful because God has shown mercy to us.

Another way of saying this is to say that our efforts to help others must always begin in our own brokenness. Helping goes sour if it begins with our superiority.

There is a difference between doing acts of mercy and relief and charity and working for justice because we feel as though it is our duty to help others and doing it because we love mercy.

Here is the secret John Wesley discovered: We are all broken. We are all one step away from self-destruction. Even the most seemingly successful among us, we are all broken. It is only God's mercy that holds us together.

I realized this in a new way when my mother was in the early stages of Alzheimer's. She knew something was happening to her mind, and it worried her. She would say to me, *Pray that I don't become mean.*

I brooded about this. Why would my mother worry so much about becoming mean? Then, one day it dawned on me, that even though she was to me such a wonderful, caring person, that my mother was right. (It was hard for me to see this.) She had within herself the capacity for meanness. It was only her piety, her spirituality, her relationship with God, God's mercy, that kept her from being a mean person.

We all have within us a capacity for self-destruction. Except for the grace of God, it would be amazingly easy for me to fall into *cynicism*. *There is within me, I've realized, the same kind of capacity for cynicism as the capacity for meanness that was within my mother. It is only God's mercy, and the mercy of those who love me, that saves me.*

*Each of us has a fault-line within ourselves that has the capacity to destroy us. Some of us live on the brink of despair. Some on the edge of addiction or lasciviousness. Some of us could easily be taken over by hate or rage or greed or acedia or passivity.*

*It is only God's mercy and the mercy of those who choose to love us, that saves us.*

*If we can learn to love this mercy than we can learn to love being merciful to others, not out of a sense of duty or obligation but because we love mercy.*

John Wesley's passion for mercy and justice for the poor came out of his own experience of defeat and despair and brokenness, and his heartwarming experience of the mercy of God. So it was for early Methodism. And this spirit still lives on in us, we who gather here to hang on to the grace of God.

It is our own brokenness and God's mercy for us that teaches us to love mercy and to be merciful.

1. John Rawls, "A Theory of Justice (Harvard University Press), p. 302.
2. Harold Luccock and Paul Hutchinson, "The Story of Methodism" (Abingdon Press) p. 79.
3. Richard P. Heitzenrater, "The Poor and the People Called Methodists" (Kingswood Books), p. 34.
4. Quoted by Gareth Lloyd in "The Poor and the People Called Methodists," p. 126.

5. Roy Hattersley, "A Brand from the Burning: The Life of John Wesley" (Doubleday), pp. 192-3.