

Sermon: *Methodist Heritage*
Text: *Various*
Date: *May 24, 2009 AM*
Place: *Jesup First UMC*

He was one of a kind, a preachers kid, born into the parsonage at Epworth. And when he was 5 years old, the parsonage caught fire and little John was the last one to be rescued, so his mama began to call him “a Brand Plucked from the Burning.” He was brilliantly educated at Oxford University. He was prolific in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He studied philosophy, history, literature, logic and theology. He studied French and taught himself to speak German, Italian, and Spanish.

And yet, it would be hard to find a more messed up pastor than John Wesley was in 1738. By the time he was in his mid-30s, he had failed at just about everything. He was a failure as a pastor; nobody wanted him to preach in their pulpits. He was a failure as a missionary; he hadn't converted one Indian in Georgia. He was a failure at romance and when he failed to serve communion to Mrs. Sophie and her new husband, they ran him out of Georgia on a rail. But probably the most profound failure of his life was still in process. For you see, by his own standards, John Wesley was a failure at what mattered most ... the Christian faith.

On his journey across the Atlantic, John encountered the Moravians, a group of German Christians, who had something he didn't, a vibrant, active faith in Jesus Christ. And when a storm blew up, John ran to his cabin, jumped in bed and hid his head under the covers. But the Moravians sang and praised God in the midst of the storm. And that brings us to May 24, 1738, the day that changed everything and

fueled the Methodist Movement. Here's what John wrote in his journal about that day:

In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. 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, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Today is Heritage Sunday in the United Methodist Church and on Heritage Sunday, we celebrate our unique heritage as Christians in the Armenian-Wesleyan tradition. And I wanted to do that by looking at a few of Methodist doctrines. There are several places in his Journal where John Wesley talked about "our doctrines". Now, some of these doctrines were unique to Methodism, but most of our Methodist doctrines are beliefs that we share with Christians of every denomination. So, let's look at these together.

First, we believe in justification by faith. Now, when we talk about justification by faith, we're talking about the way we are made right with God. And we believe that we are made right with God by faith alone, not by faith and works, not by faith and prayer, not by faith and baptism or by faith and communion. Paul said: ***"By grace are you saved through faith and this not of yourselves, even this is a gift from God."***

In his sermons, Justification by Faith, Wesley said: "Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself,' but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that He loves me, and gave Himself for me. And at

what time soever a sinner thus believes, be it in early childhood, in the strength of his years, or when he is old and hoary-haired, God justifies that ungodly one."

Jesus told a story about two men who went to church to pray. One man, a Pharisee, stood at the altar and proclaimed his moral greatness. The other, a sinner, stood at a distance and said: "God, be merciful to me a sinner." And Jesus said: "I tell you this is the one who went home justified."

We believe in Justification by Faith as the beginning of the Christian life.

Second, we believe in New Birth.

The theological word for New Birth is "Regeneration" and that simply means that our lives are changed. Wesley said justification is a change in relationship, but regeneration is a change within the person.

Paul told the church at Corinth: "If anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away and behold all things have become new." I believe that's what King David was talking about in Psalm 51 when he cries out to God: "Create in me a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit within me."

Now, if anybody knew the reality of a changed life, it was John Wesley. After that Sunday in May 1738, John was a changed man. His life was filled with power; his ministry was alive and fruitful. Here's how Charles described it in one of his hymns:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke the dungeon filled with light.
My chains fell off; my heart was free. I rose went forth and followed thee.
Everything changed. John changed!

We believe in the New Birth.

Third, we believe in the witness of the Spirit. Romans 8:15 says: “The Spirit, God Himself, constrains us to cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ And as the Spirit pulls this cry out of us, the Spirit Himself bears witness to us that we are children of God.”

It always bothers me when I ask people “Are you saved?” and they respond: “I hope so.” Listen, the children of God can know that we are children of God. I know who my parents are. I know in whom I believe; I know the One who has changed my life; and so I know who my heavenly Father is.

This was a big issue for John Wesley. He wrote at least three different sermons dealing with “The Witness of the Spirit.” You see, he believed that we all long to have assurance of our salvation. That’s why he wrote that day: “An assurance was given to me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” So, Charles would write, with confidence, “No condemnation, now I dread, Jesus and all in Him is mine. Alive in Him, my living head and clothed in righteousness divine.”

We believe in the witness of the Spirit.

Fourth, we believe in Christian Perfection. Now, don’t be put off by the word “perfection.” We’re not talking about absolute perfection; we’re not talking about some kind of religious superiority. But the Bible does say, “You will be holy even as I, the Lord your God, am holy.”

And so, Wesley would spread his message of scriptural holiness throughout England, Ireland and

Scotland and across the Atlantic into the colonies of North America. Wesley wanted to know of those early Methodists what every pastor in the Methodist tradition is asked: “Are you moving on to perfection?” and “Do you expect to be made perfect in this life?” in fact, the very heart of Wesleyan theology is Wesley’s doctrine of Sanctifying Grace. And so, Charles would write in one of his hymns: “That I thy mercy may proclaim, that all mankind thy trust may see, hallow they great and glorious name, and perfect holiness in me.”

We believe in Christian Perfection.

That’s our Methodist Heritage. We walk in the shoes of Charles Wesley, an Anglican Priest who wrote over 6000 published hymns, who labored beside his brother in the Methodist Movement, preaching and leading the societies until Christ called him home. We walk in the shoes of John Wesley who traveled over 125,000 miles on horseback during his lifetime – who preached over 42,000 sermons in over 55 years of ministry – who started churches, and orphanages, and prison ministries and soup kitchens throughout England – who got up off his sick bed to walk the streets of town to collect money for poor children. This is our Methodist Heritage and it all started with the change that happened in John Wesley’s life on May 24, 1738 – 271 years ago. And because his heart was strangely warmed, millions of people around the world claim Wesley as their spiritual father and have had their hearts set ablaze by the fire of God. Let us pray that one this Heritage Sunday, our hearts might be strangely warmed too.