

A Living Legacy: 1. The Faith of a Methodist
Ephesians 2:8-10
February 2, 2020
Pastor Steve Richards

The older I get the more the past matters to me. I'm the fifth generation pastor in my family, something I had hoped to avoid. And I tried – I really tried, thinking I could be the generation to do something else – that my legacy, the legacy I could pass to my children and grandchildren would point in another direction. We all will leave a legacy for those who come after us. In the words of hymn 707, "from the past will come the future." That's true for what's ahead but it's also true about what got us here. Many years ago, we made a trip to the Cornwall region of England. It's where my grandfather Richards was a Methodist preacher until he immigrated to the United States as a young adult. He died before I was born, but my parents gave me his middle name – Leonard. For most of my life, I never really cared for the name – and only times my parents used it, I knew I was in trouble. But when I was with my English relatives, I learned they referred to him by his middle name – my middle name! They called him Uncle Leonard, and somehow after hearing that and stories about his life and seeing the church where he had preached, I suddenly felt proud to have Leonard as part of my name. And now it's also my grandson's middle name. I'm living a legacy and for most of my life I didn't know that.

In this series, I hope you will make some discoveries. You may not have selected this church because it is Methodist. You may not even think of yourself as Methodist, but you are here – and the Methodist heritage shapes what happens here and how we worship. Because of that, you are part of this living legacy.

John Wesley was a man who had great strengths and a lot of weakness. He was an ordinary person but he had a way of connecting with God that transformed lives, gave birth to a Christian movement that changed the landscape of Great Britain and still influences what we do here today. To understand what was happening as Wesley came on the scene, I thought this gadget (a pendulum) would be a helpful image. I remember learning about Newton's law of motion in physics class: *every action has an equal and opposite reaction*. And then I heard something similar in my college philosophy class. For every great idea or thesis there was a counter idea or antithesis that developed. And in the history of civilization, these competing ideas often gave rise to conflict and even wars. But once the conflict died down, what emerged was a synthesis. In time, the synthesis would become the new thesis which was met with an antithesis that finally became a synthesis.

In 1532, King Henry VIII was desperate for a son who could one day take the throne. He had one wife after another. He asked the Pope for an annulment, and the Pope said no. But Henry was the king and had been given the title of "defender of the faith" by the Pope – so Henry announced that the church in Rome no longer made the rules. So, now there was the Church of England led, not by the pope but by the king. Meanwhile on the European continent the Protestant Reformation was taking place – and some hoped the Church of England would take on the influences of the Reformation. After Henry VIII, Edward VI came to the throne, and he was influenced by the Calvinists in Switzerland. Now there was conflict between the Catholics and the Calvinists. Each time there was a new king or queen, there was a new thesis and then an antithesis. When Elizabeth I became queen, she proposed a middle way that valued both the Catholics and the Calvinists. But then came James I who authorized the King James Version of the Bible – an effort to move the church back toward the Catholic and away from the Calvinists who had their Geneva translation of the Bible.

Then a new influence arose – Arminianism. The Calvinists believed that salvation was possible only through the grace of God. And God only offers salvation to those God has predetermined to be saved and everyone else has been chosen to be damned. If you are among the chosen to be saved, God's grace is irresistible. But Arminius said, that can't be. The Gospel is for all. God wants everyone to be saved. People have free will to choose. [pendulum] Then along came the Puritans who did not have the freedom they wanted to worship as they wanted. By the end of the 17th Century we have the Age of Enlightenment which emphasized reason. For a people who were tired about the fighting about religion, this way of thinking was welcomed. Too much religion was considered a bad thing. Too much enthusiasm was bad. Reason was celebrated. [pendulum]

In 1703, John Wesley was born, the fifteenth child of Samuel and Suzanna Wesley. His parents were strong Christians. They were pietists the antithesis to reason: salvation was not found in the intellect but the heart – through Jesus Christ. His father was a minister in the Church of England. His mother had a very deep and strong faith that may have been the single greatest influence in Wesley's faith development. When John was five, the family home was burned to the ground as an act of vandalism by those opposed to his father's preaching. John was trapped on the upper floor, rescued as the home was engulfed in flames. Suzanna felt her son had been saved by God for a special purpose. John would say that he was a "brand plucked from the burning." As a youth, he went to study at Christ Church in Oxford and later went to Lincoln College. He was ordained a minister and became a priest in the Church of England. He was also a teacher who tutored students at Oxford. But Wesley had this sense that something was missing. He went to church, read the Bible, and prayed but he felt that he was an almost Christian – not a complete Christian. He began seeking more about God. He began rising at 4 am to pray, took communion every day, studied the Bible, met with other Christians, and did good deeds. He wanted to be an *altogether* Christian, not an *almost* Christian.

One day his younger brother Charles invited him back to Oxford to lead a small group of students. They met three times a week for Bible study, daily communion, prayed, attended worship, and served the poor. Others at Oxford where reason was celebrated made fun of Wesley and the others, calling them Enthusiasts and Bible moths and Methodists. Eventually, they would embrace the name Methodists. In 1735, John's father died and for a time he considered becoming the parish priest, but he also had this idea of going to America to convert the Indians. Later that year, he traveled with his brother Charles and a few others to be a missionary in Georgia. But his two years in Georgia were a complete disaster. He tried to convert the Indians but no one believed. He tried to be a parish priest but the people felt he was an *enthusiast*. He started small groups but they didn't last. Then he fell in love with a young woman named Sophie Hopkey, but John could not decide whether God wanted him to remain single the rest of his life or be married and while he was trying to decide Sophie accepted a marriage proposal from another man. Wesley could not accept that she had married someone else and so as the jilted lover, he excommunicated her. Her husband brought John Wesley up on charges of abusing his authority. At first Wesley fought the charges, then one night he fled, boarded a ship for England. The trip home gave him a lot of time to think. He remembered how perilous the trip to Georgia had been and how terrible one particular storm had been. Wesley had been terrified, afraid of dying. But also on the ship were a group of German pietists who in the worst of the storm were praying and singing hymns and at total peace. Looking back, Wesley realized he wanted that kind of faith.

In 1738, back in London, he was seeking the assurance that had always alluded him. He wanted the peace that passes all understanding. On Sunday, May 21, his brother Charles had an experience of the Holy Spirit that transformed him, and John longed for the same assurance

of God's love. On Wednesday, May 24, 1738, John had his own experience. Here's how he describes it in his journal:

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.

John Wesley had been trying so hard to be an altogether Christian, and on that night he discovered the one thing that had been missing. He knew God. He believed. He served God, but now he experienced God. He let God love him. And he began preaching that gospel. We need to stop trying so hard and let God love us. His first sermon after this experience was preached at St. Mary's Chapel in Oxford where his scripture for the sermon was Ephesians 2:8-10. **You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.** We trust in God and find our salvation and faith in God. What is grace? It is God's love and acceptance given to us unconditionally. But there is a second part, we are saved for a purpose – for good works. God prepares us for this. This realization brought a confidence and a power to John Wesley's life and ministry.

Here's what I hope you will remember. First, the darkest moments of John Wesley's life were followed by his greatest moment of faith. And if it had not been for the dark moments, he might never have known God the way that he did. Some of you are in that dark place where you feel you have failed: failed at relationships, failed at school or employment, failed at decision-making – and you can't see a way out. Don't give up. John Wesley kept searching. He never let go of God, and he would come to realize that in the darkest moments God was already working in him and preparing him for life.

Second, Wesley was offering a synthesis, a middle way. He listened to the right and to the left and he forged a new way. It was not just reason and it was not just faith – but both together. One side was saying we are saved by faith alone. The other side was saying we are saved by works. John Wesley said both – we are saved by the grace of God, and we are saved for a purpose – to pursue what he called sanctification. Some were preaching the Arminian emphasis on free will. Others were preaching the Calvinist emphasis that God is sovereign and has a plan. Wesley said it is both. It may be easier to be one or the other, but the truth is often to be found in the gray area between the two. Even in our world today, we find two sides shouting at each other, each one claiming to have the truth. But if we could listen to each other there might be some element of truth in both. Wesley stood in that middle way.

Finally, Wesley had a deep desire to be an *altogether* Christian, to surrender his life wholly and completely to God. I want to close with one of John Wesley's prayers:

To you, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, my Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, I give up myself entirely. May I no longer serve myself, but you, all the days of my life.

I give you my understanding. May it be my only care to know you, your perfections, your works, and your will... I give you my will. May I have no will of my own... I give you my affections. Dispose of them all. Be my love, my fear, my joy... I give you my body. May I glorify you with it, and preserve it holy, fit for you, O God, to dwell in... I give you all my worldly goods. May I prize them and use them only for you... I give you my credit and reputation... I give you myself and my all...

O my God and my all, when hereafter I shall be tempted to break this solemn engagement... may my answer be: "I am not my own. I am not for myself, not for the world, but for my God..."

[A Prayer of Submission, from a collection of prayers published by John Wesley in 1733. The entire prayer can be found in *A Longing for Holiness*, published by Upper Room Books.]

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 2, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Holy God, your grace is truly amazing. It draws us to you, inviting us into your presence. It allows us to experience your delight in us and helps us to trust your love even if and when we do not deserve it. It's only by your grace that we dare to hope for eternal life with you. Thank you for grace that amazes, convicts, invites, and consoles. May our lives be our grateful response for your extravagant gift. Amen.

Monday, February 3

Scripture: 2 Kings 10:15; Romans 14:1-4

Jehu departed from there and encountered Rechab's son Jehonadab. Jehu greeted him, and asked, "Are you as committed to me as I am to you?" Jehonadab responded, "Yes, I am." "If so," said Jehu, "then give me your hand." So Jehonadab put out his hand, and Jehu pulled him up into the chariot.

Welcome the person who is weak in faith—but not in order to argue about differences of opinion. One person believes in eating everything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Those who eat must not look down on the ones who don't, and the ones who don't eat must not judge the ones who do, because God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servants? They stand or fall before their own Lord (and they will stand, because the Lord has the power to make them stand).

Observation: In his sermon titled "Catholic Spirit," John Wesley asked: "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? ... Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences." (catholic is actually a small "c" meaning "universal" and not a capital "C" for Catholic Church) The idea is Scriptural, from ancient Israel to the apostle Paul.

Application: How can it strengthen God's work, and our own walk with God, when we and others focus on essentials we agree on more than on small differences that divide us? How can you help others on their personal journey of "loving God, loving each other, loving the world," without comparing or judging their faith by yours?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, your family is large and diverse. Give me your spirit of unconditional love, so that differences that do not bother you will not bother me. Amen.

Tuesday, February 4

Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-6

Therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together. You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. ⁵ There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.

Observation: While Ephesians called on all Christ-followers to "accept each other with love," that's not what John Wesley's father, Samuel, and his family experienced in their church in

Epworth. His family's history surely made John aware of the ways human differences can damage Christ's cause. The "Catholic Spirit" Wesley preached is one Christians must intentionally nurture.

Application: The city of Ephesus was filled with religious differences, and yet Paul called the Christians to adopt a spirit of unity. How is Paul's message of humility, gentleness, patience, love and unity needed today? How would it strengthen God's Kingdom if more of us adopted that same attitude rather than focus on areas of difference?

Prayer: Lord, free me from the emotional blocks which blind me to people and make me argumentative, judgmental and unloving. I want this "Catholic Spirit" that you, Paul and John Wesley had. Amen.

You can read John Wesley's sermon, "Catholic Spirit," at this link:
<http://www.crivoice.org/cathspirit.html>

Wednesday, February 5

Scripture: Ephesians 6:1-4

As for children, obey your parents in the Lord, because it is right. The commandment *Honor your father and mother* is the first one with a promise attached: *so that things will go well for you, and you will live for a long time in the land*. As for parents, don't provoke your children to anger, but raise them with discipline and instruction about the Lord.

Observation: John Wesley's mother, Susanna had nineteen children and greatly prided herself on having taught them, one after another, with strict discipline - but in keeping with the wisdom of Ephesians, there was also love. She profoundly shaped the lives and faith of her children. When children lead fruitful, effective lives (as John Wesley did), how much of that would emerge regardless of how they are raised, and how much is taught and modeled by parents or other key people? Susanna provided a legacy for her children.

Application: What does it look like when parents "don't provoke your children to anger, but raise them with discipline and instruction about the Lord"? How well did your parents find a way to live out those two injunctions? If you're a parent, how would your kids say you're doing on those two points?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, for the positives from nature and nurture in my life, I'm thankful. For any negatives, I pray for your continued work in my life to keep healing me, turning my vulnerabilities into blessings for your kingdom. Amen.

Thursday, February 6

Scripture: Psalm 68:3-6

But let the righteous be glad and celebrate before God. Let them rejoice with gladness! Sing to God! Sing praises to his name! Exalt the one who rides the clouds! The LORD is his name. Celebrate before him! Father of orphans and defender of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the lonely in their homes; he sets prisoners free with happiness, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

Observation: At one point, John Wesley's parents refused to live together for 12 months, because they disagreed on who ought to be king of England. Like many of us, Wesley bore

scars from his flawed family. He loved his parents, but he put his ultimate trust in God, who said through the psalmist that God is the uniquely reliable parent for even the orphaned or lonely.

Application: God's design is to have earthly parents model God's love and holiness for their child. Still today, that design doesn't always work out. When have you turned to God for nurture and comfort? In what ways did God provide you the "family" you needed? Do you know anyone who you could bless by extending God's love and care?

Prayer: O God, the psalmist said you are "Father of orphans and defender of widows." Thank you for always being with me. Give me eyes to see others who are hurting, and use me to bless them with your love and caring. Amen.

Friday, February 7

Scripture: Zechariah 3:1-4

Then the LORD showed me the high priest Joshua, standing before the messenger from the LORD, and the Adversary was standing by his right side to accuse him. And the LORD said to the Adversary: "The LORD rebukes you, Adversary. The LORD, the one choosing Jerusalem, rebukes you. Is this one not a log snatched from the fire?" Joshua was wearing filthy clothes and standing before the messenger. He responded to those standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." And he said to Joshua, "Look, I have removed your guilt from you. Put on priestly robes."

Observation: In 1709, a fire in the Wesley's home trapped John, age 5 ½, on the second floor. A brave neighbor rescued him by standing on another man's shoulders just before the roof fell in. From that day forward, both John and his mother said that he had been "snatched from the fire." They believed firmly that God had a special purpose for his life.

Application: In your life, what "fires" (outward or inward) has God snatched you out of? How have God's grace and mercy shaped your sense of your life's purpose? What experiences have made you the most grateful for the gift of life, of each day?

Prayer: O God, I thank you for the gift of this day. Help me to live this day as a gift from your hand, to let your light shine through me and to thank you for the privilege of being alive. Amen.

Saturday, February 8

Scripture: Romans 8:18-28

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience. In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will. We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Observation: John Wesley's early years were tough. His family was poor, and had a mix of strengths and weaknesses. Religious and political divisions gave rise to conflict in England, and with a huge gap between rich and poor, many people had given up faith. Yet these same factors helped shape the man he became. For 40 years he rode an estimated 8,000 miles per year on horseback, preached an estimated 1,000 sermons per year, and dramatically changed England for the better. He loved God, and God worked all things for good in his influential life.

Application: God, who is always good, can take all things, even the painful and difficult ones, and bend them to serve a good purpose in your life, if we are willing to put them in God's hands. Can you look back and see how God has brought good out of hard things you have faced? What are you facing right now that is painful, frustrating or scary?

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for being with me in good times and bad. Thank you for using your power to bring good out of even the bad times I face. Teach me to trust you more and more as I journey through life. Amen.