

A Living Legacy: 2. The Heart of a Methodist
Revelation 2:2-4
February 9, 2020
Pastor Tami Luckhardt

Today is Scout Sunday. It is also the 50th anniversary of the founding of Troop 570. In 1969, a couple of parents asked Gail Bimber, a member of Messiah Church (at the time) to be the scoutmaster. And with that, this church chartered troop 570. Gail had earned his Eagle Scout and had a passion for paying it forward. But two years later, he took a job in California. So Jim Turnham took on the role but a year later, he moved to Canada. That left the troop without a scoutmaster until in his words “a naïve Phil Zietlow who had no clue about boy scouts” was persuaded to become the Scoutmaster. And then, two years ago, Matt Abe signed on as the current scoutmaster.

Here’s a few statistics. In fifty years, there have been 4 scoutmasters, about 700 scouts, 80 eagle scouts, 70 life scouts, 56 assistant scoutmasters, and 12 committee chairs. It takes a village! There’s a plaque in Heritage Hall that lists all of the Eagle Scouts. One of them is Messiah member, Bill Sherck who earned his eagle in 1988.

This week, Pastor Steve asked Bill what he remembered, what has stayed with him all these years – because that gets to legacy. Bill described a summer adventure in which they biked 153 miles from Duluth to the Gunflint Trail, then exchanged the bikes for canoes and paddled to Ely. He said: “Not a lot of people in this world get challenged like that, especially at our age, and with the freedom Phil allowed. Oddly enough, this Sunday night’s edition of Minnesota Bound is dedicated to the Boundary Waters.” He attributes what he does today, in part, to being part of this troop. And when asked what has had the most impacted him and his life, he said, “the adult leaders – the scoutmaster and assistant scoutmasters.”

This church has a legacy. A legacy is what gets remembered. **Legacies are pathways that guide the people who follow.** By coming here and connecting with Messiah Church, you have stepped into one of those pathways and together we are a living legacy.

This morning, I want us to look at our Methodist pathway – to look back at the 18th century story of John Wesley— in order to understand the heart and character of a Methodist.

There was a Sunday a few months ago when the ushers lit the candles and within a few seconds, they burned out. These candles have wicks but no wax. They are filled with oil, and when the reservoir runs out of oil, the candle burns out. In the week prior to that Sunday, there had been a memorial service, and because the person who usually fills the candles with oil was out of town, the flame became weaker and weaker until it disappeared. I think that’s an example of what happens to our faith and to religious movements over time. Over time, if we are not paying attention to faith – if we are not adding fuel to the reservoir – the flame grows

dim until we can't see it. We can't feel it. Our faith grows cold and we feel distant to God and sometimes in that state -- we pursue things we have no business pursuing.

Maybe you've been to church camp or a weekend retreat or a mission trip – and at some point during that experience, you felt God touch you. You felt close to God. When I worked in youth ministry, I saw this happen over and over again. I can remember being up all night on the final night of mission trips because the youth were so on fire and they wanted to talk. So we prayed together and they said, "I'll never forget this. When I get home I will be a different person. I will tell everyone." And they meant it. But what happened? They got home and they had the same friends, the same parents who hadn't had their experience. And at home they found the same problems that had been there before their experience. At home life was nothing like the mission experience. And in time, the God who felt so close now feels so far away.

In today's reading from the Revelation of John, Jesus is speaking to the Church at Ephesus. The Apostle Paul was the founding pastor of this church. He spent three years with that church, longer than any other church that he started. Tradition tells us that the Virgin Mary lived out her final years and died in Ephesus. And the Apostle John lived his final years in Ephesus. One would think if there was a church anywhere that would be strong and on fire it would be Ephesus, but that's not what it says in Revelation: **You have let go of the love you had at first. So remember the high point from which you have fallen. Change your hearts and lives and do the things you did at first.**

That's our human condition. People are baptized. They come to faith. They are committed to living the faith, but over time Christians begin doing un-Christian things. But then God lights a fire or a flame. In the 1500s it was the Protestant Reformation – Luther, Calvin and Zwingli. They lit a fire in the hearts of believers, and they went back to the Bible and said that what we are doing in the church is missing the heart of religion and there was a great reform and revival in the Church. But what happened? After a while, the people forgot – and they began to slip into some of the same sins that they had protested against. And in the 1700s, that's what had happened in England. 200 years after the Protestant Reformation, the Church of England was as dead as the Catholic Church had been before the Reformation.

Last week, we saw how Wesley looked within himself and felt something was missing. He also felt something was missing in the Church of England. He looked at his fellow priests, and they seemed uninterested in the faith. They were collecting their salary, while others filled the pulpits. They were doing things no priest had any business doing. Others were living right but just going through the motions. They had no fire, no passion, no heart. They had a faith-of-the-head but no heart. In 1738, John Wesley had an experience of the Holy Spirit: his heart was strangely warmed. He felt the power of God's love. He let God in – let God love him. And from that time forward, he began preaching where he could. He said: There is more to being Christian than being a member of a church. There is more to being Christian than being baptized. There is more to being Christian than going through the motions. There is a power that is love, and that is a "love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down..." Wesley wanted to lead people toward that kind of love.

In 1744, he gave a sermon in St. Mary's Chapel at Oxford. The sanctuary was filled with pastors and professors and seminary students – and here's some of what he said:

Do you "remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy;" to spend it in the more immediate worship of God? When you are in his house, do you consider that God is there? Do you behave "as seeing him that is invisible?" Do you know how to possess your bodies in sanctification and honor?" Are not drunkenness and uncleanness found among you? Yea, are there not of you who "glory in their shame?" Do not many of you "take the name of God in vain," perhaps habitually, without either remorse or fear?...

For, how few of you spend, from one week to another, a single hour in private prayer! How few have any thought of God in the general tenor of your conversation! Who of you is in any degree acquainted with the work of his Spirit? ... In the name of the Lord God Almighty, I ask, what religion are you of? For... what possibility... is there that Christianity... should be again the religion of this place?...

The church had lost its heart, its scriptural vitality, its spiritual passion. Who would restore it? Wesley challenged others in the faith – and as he did, a lot of people were offended. After that sermon at Oxford – he was not invited back. He went to his home church of Epworth and after a similar sermon he was not welcome to preach there again. So he announced to the people entering the church that he would preach outside later that day. And he stood on his father's tomb and preached. People came and listened and the flame began to burn bright.

Sometimes when we hear the truth and we don't want to hear it and what happens? We get angry. That's what happened here. John Wesley said, "The world is my parish" and he began traveling on horseback from town to town. He would go to the parish priest and ask to speak and he was told, "Mr. Wesley, I've heard about you and you may not speak here." So he would speak outside – on the streets or in the fields. Sometimes he went into town and started singing out loud (he'd sing hymns which were the contemporary Christian music of the time) and people would gather – curious about what was happening, thinking he must be drunk – and when he stopped singing, he would start preaching and when he finished he would invite them to return with their families and friends and hundreds, sometimes as many as tens of thousands would return. Gwennap Pit is an amphitheater in the middle of a field miles from any town. It is reported that 30,000 people gathered at this place to hear Wesley. Once he was asked how he got so many people to show up and he said: "I go out and light myself on fire and people come to watch me burn."

The Church of England was not happy. The parish priest often organized mobs against Wesley to shout him down and to write articles against him. When that didn't work, they paid people to throw things at him – rotten tomatoes and eggs or stones. Sometimes he was attacked and beaten. But Wesley did not give up. He persevered. That's one of the things it means to be Methodist. We don't give up. In the face of challenges and obstacles and struggles, we get up and keep going. Wesley was the Energizer Bunny of 18th Century Christianity.

And what happened? Eventually Wesley won over his critics or he outlived them. At his home church in Epworth –still today, they point out -with pride - that Wesley had been baptized there. And show the communion cup that Wesley used. At St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, this statue stands outside the building. In Oxford, there’s stained glass windows honoring Wesley. Now, he is revered and celebrated! Wesley transformed the church because he did not give up.

In 1739, Wesley published a tract called “The Character of a Methodist”.

A Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;" one who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul...

Wesley did not offer a new theology. Methodists believe in Bible Christianity, but we live what we believe. We walk the walk – loving God with heart, mind, soul and strength – wholly surrendered to God, letting the love of Christ shine through.

So here we are nearly 300 years beyond Wesley and his revival. Our faith has the tendency to grow dim and go out. As a church, I believe our best days are ahead of us. God can do great things through this church. Sometimes I’m asked if I really believe that. I do, but I also believe that if enough of us say the best is behind us, God will allow us to choose. Or, maybe it’s your own faith that has grown dim. There was a moment when the flame was bright and you gave your life to Christ and you were committed. But over time you forgot. You don’t read the Bible, as you once did. You don’t pray, as you once did. You miss more worship than you make. And you have slipped into habits that do not please God. And you feel so far away.

This morning, I invite you back. God has never left you. Don’t give up. If you are following God, sometimes it is going to be difficult. Others won’t understand your priorities or they will distract you or lead you astray. But those for whom the flame burns bright are those who get back up and keep going and going and going. We are called to be altogether Christians – to love God and to love our neighbor. To live in such a way that when people see us out in the community, they will say – see how they love. That’s the pathway that could be our legacy.

Let’s pray: Would you close your eyes and imagine God’s love and mercy is holding you tight. Let God speak these words into your heart: “I know your name. I know where you’ve been and what you’ve done. I know everything possible about you, and I love you. I have always loved you. And I long to hold you tight.” And if you would, under your breath, speak these words: “Yes, Lord. I accept your love. I trust you. I trust your love, and I want to walk with you, every moment of every day. Thank you for your love. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 9, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, fill us with your Spirit of love, joy, purpose and life. We desire to make our hearts right before you. Bring to light anything that may be in our way and keeping us from loving as you have taught. Ignite in us once more a love for you that will be reflected in all

we say and do. Help us to be mindful of your constant call to love, and always grateful for your grace which keeps us focused on your mission in this world. Amen.

Monday, February 10

Scripture: John 16:1-4; Matthew 5:10-12

I have said these things to you so that you won't fall away. They will expel you from the synagogue. The time is coming when those who kill you will think that they are doing a service to God. They will do these things because they don't know the Father or me. But I have said these things to you so that when their time comes, you will remember that I told you about them. "I didn't say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you.

"Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. "Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

Observation: John Wesley returned to his hometown of Epworth and was not permitted to preach in the church; instead he preached in the churchyard. He wrote: "At six I came and found such a congregation as I believe Epworth never saw before. I stood ... upon my father's tombstone, and cried, 'The kingdom of heaven is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost' [Rom. 14:17]."

Application: Jesus and John Wesley, did their best to persuade others to accept their message, yet found themselves hated and harassed. How does Jesus call us to respond if that happens? How can your love of God help to keep you open to needed change (personal or organizational)?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you didn't hate even when others hated you. You also didn't abandon your mission when facing their hate. Keep teaching me how to live with your kind of steadfast love and sense of mission. Amen.

Tuesday, February 11

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:11-15

So we try to persuade people, since we know what it means to fear the Lord. We are well known by God, and I hope that in your heart we are well known by you as well. We aren't trying to commend ourselves to you again. Instead, we are giving you an opportunity to be proud of us so that you could answer those who take pride in superficial appearance, and not in what is in the heart. If we are crazy, it's for God's sake. If we are rational, it's for your sake. The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: one died for the sake of all; therefore, all died. He died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised.

Observation: John Wesley concluded, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, that Christ "died for the sake of all," not just for "the elect." His faith that God's all-inclusive love and grace gives us the freedom to choose our eternal fate was the basis for his powerful, urgent preaching of salvation. That belief in God's free grace and our moral freedom became a defining part of Methodism.

Application: Paul, expressing some of his core convictions, wrote, “So we try to persuade people.” What differences do you see between trying to persuade people and trying to force them to believe as you do? Are you able to love people who hold views different from yours and will not be persuaded to change?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, even when we Christians differ about just how you save us, we agree that you do, and that we are grateful for that gift. I thank you for the ways your love and grace are at work in my life. Amen.

Wednesday, February 12

Scripture: Psalm 119:1-16

Those whose way is blameless—who walk in the LORD’s Instruction—are truly happy! Those who guard God’s laws are truly happy! They seek God with all their hearts. They don’t even do anything wrong! They walk in God’s ways. God, you have ordered that your decrees should be kept most carefully. How I wish my ways were strong when it comes to keeping your statutes! Then I wouldn’t be ashamed when I examine all your commandments. I will give thanks to you with a heart that does right as I learn your righteous rules. I will keep your statutes. Please don’t leave me all alone! How can young people keep their paths pure? By guarding them according to what you’ve said. I have sought you with all my heart. Don’t let me stray from any of your commandments! I keep your word close, in my heart, so that I won’t sin against you. You, LORD, are to be blessed! Teach me your statutes. I will declare out loud all the rules you have spoken. I rejoice in the content of your laws as if I were rejoicing over great wealth. I will think about your precepts and examine all your paths. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget what you have said.

Observation: His critics called Wesley an unruly agitator, but he was in fact a very disciplined man. In the same spirit as the writer of Psalm 119, he wrote in his journal, “About fifty of us being met, the Rules of the Society were read over and carefully considered one by one; but we did not find any that could be spared. So we all agreed to abide by them all and to recommend them with our might.”

Application: Bishop Reuben Job, in his book *Three Simple Rules*, paraphrased the three General Rules as “do no harm,” “do all the good you can,” and “stay in love with God.” How can these rules (which Wesley never claimed were on the same level as God’s law in the Bible) help you live into the reality the psalmist expressed: “I will give thanks to you with a heart that does right as I learn your righteous rules” (verse 7)?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for accepting me just as I am. Now guide me as, in grateful response to your love, I seek to use these rules to guide me in living more and more as you lived on earth. Amen.

Thursday, February 13

Scripture: John 15:9-17

“As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I don’t call you servants any longer, because servants don’t know what their

master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you. You didn't choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you could go and produce fruit and so that your fruit could last. As a result, whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. I give you these commandments so that you can love each other.

Observation: After visiting a Methodist “band” (small group) of coal miners, John Wesley described their commitment in his journal: “No person ever misses his band or class; they have no jar of any kind among them but with one heart and one mind ‘provoke one another to love and to good works.’” This group of ordinary working people, Wesley said, could be “a pattern” for all Methodists. Jesus’ love for God the Father led him to commit, obey, and share God’s love with others, and he calls us to that same kind of commitment, obedience and love.

Application: Love breeds commitment—the more we love God and others, the more committed we are to them. How does God’s love for you motivate you to greater loyalty? How does your love for others lead you to commit time and energy to them? In what practical ways do you live out your loving commitment to God and others?

Prayer: Lord God, I love you, and I trust you. I want my life to bring you honor and joy as I obey your guidance. Mold my attitudes and actions from the inside out to always be pleasing to you. Amen.

Friday, February 14

Scripture: Psalm 149:1-5

Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song; sing God’s praise in the assembly of the faithful! Let Israel celebrate its maker; let Zion’s children rejoice in their king! Let them praise God’s name with dance; let them sing God’s praise with the drum and lyre! Because the LORD is pleased with his people, God will beautify the poor with saving help. Let the faithful celebrate with glory; let them shout for joy on their beds.

Observation: Charles Wesley was the family’s hymn writer—probably the most prolific ever, with over 6,000 hymns to his name. John cared about worship music, too, and published “Directions for Singing” for the use of his Methodist societies. Like the Psalms, they urged everyone to join in singing praises to God.

Application: Singing, wonderful as it is, is only one form of human expression. The psalmist also wrote, “Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with timbrel and harp... Let his faithful people rejoice in this honor and sing for joy on their beds” (verses 3, 5). What ways of expressing the deep joy God gives you deep inside are most natural for you? How can you use them to praise and honor God?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I offer all glory, praise and honor to you today. Make of my life a song of love to you. Amen.

Saturday, February 15

Scripture: Ephesians 5:15-21

So be careful to live your life wisely, not foolishly. Take advantage of every opportunity because these are evil times. Because of this, don’t be ignorant, but understand the Lord’s will. Don’t get drunk on wine, which produces depravity. Instead, be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the

Lord in your hearts; always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; and submit to each other out of respect for Christ.

Observation: Wesley's "Directions for Singing" included some specific musical tips. "Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength," he advised. He followed with a caution: "Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation ... but strive to unite your voices together." But the most important idea came last: "Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature."

Application: When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, he told her that the living water he would give her would be "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). That same sense of "welling up" fills today's reading. When have you most clearly sensed the joy, meaning and acceptance that God gives "welling up" in you? In what ways, musical or otherwise, have you been able to express your thanks for God's gift?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, instead of just numbing my pain, worry or disappointment, you offer me gratitude, purpose and life. Fill me with your Spirit, and send me into the coming week with your song ringing in my heart. Amen.