***Saving Grace 1: John Wesley and Conversion***

Scripture: Romans 5:1-11

September 13, 2015

**Midweek Provocative Question**

* When have you felt your heart “strangely warmed?”

**SERMON SUMMARY**

Brought up in a parsonage in 18th Century England, John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) learned from early on that it is important to live our faith. But his soul was deeply restless. He begged a friend to help him figure out why he did not feel that he had faith. Yes, you read that right. John Wesley struggled with his faith. He often thought he didn’t have enough faith – or maybe no faith at all. On May 24, 1784, Wesley experienced a “conversion of the heart.”

**A Guide for Daily Reading and Meditation**

**A Prayer for Every Day:** Almighty God, in a time of great need you raised up your servants John and

Charles Wesley, and by your Spirit inspired them to kindle a flame of sacred love which leaped and ran, an inextinguishable blaze. Grant that all those whose hearts have been warmed at these altar fires, being continually refreshed by your grace, may be so devoted to the increase of scriptural holiness throughout the land that in this our time of great need, your will may fully and effectively be done on earth as it is in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Fred D. Gealy, U.S.A., 20th cent., alt.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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**MONDAY**

Read Romans 5:1-2 (*NRSV*)[[2]](#footnote-2)

*1* Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, *2* through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

In his sermon entitled “Justification by Faith,” John Wesley wrote (emphasis mine and information in square brackets is added for definition):

“The plain scriptural notion of justification is **pardon**, the forgiveness of sins. It is that act of God the Father, hereby, for the sake of the **propitiation** [the act of making an atoning, or saving, sacrifice] made by the blood of his Son, he ‘showeth forth his righteousness (or mercy) by the remission of the sins that are past.’ . . . God will not inflict on that sinner what he deserved to suffer, because the Son of his love hath suffered for him. And from the time we are ‘accepted through the Beloved,’ ‘reconciled to God through his blood,’ he loves, and blesses, and watches over us for good, **even as if we had never sinned**.”

Wesley goes on to say later in the sermon: “I cannot describe the nature of this faith better than in the words of our own Church: ‘The only instrument of salvation’ (whereof justification is one branch) ‘is faith; that is, a sure trust and confidence that God both hath and will forgive our sins, that he hath accepted us again into His favour, for the merits of Christ’s death and passion.’”

* What is the state of your faith today?
* What does it mean to you that faith is the path to pardon?
* In the Service of the Baptismal Covenant (which includes membership in the church), you answered this question: Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace… What does that mean to you today?

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**TUESDAY**

Read Romans 5:1-11

*1* Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, *2* through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. *3* And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, *4* and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, *5* and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. *6* For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. *7* Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. *8* But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. *9* Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. *10* For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. *11* But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

1. As you read the first time, note words or phrases that jump out at you today. What is the significance of those words/phrases for you?
2. The second time you read, write down what you think God is saying to you today about your practice of your faith.
3. Talk about #2 with someone that you trust.

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**WEDNESDAY**

In this week’s sermon, we discussed John Wesley’s struggle with his own faith. Having been ordained in 1728 and awarded a fellowship to the Lincoln College of Oxford in 1729, Wesley began a serious examination of his faith. Read this excerpt from the biography on Lincoln’s website:

He had quite a lot of leave granted during the first part of his fellowship to help his father in the parish of Wroot but in 1729 the Rector summoned him back to Lincoln to become a tutor. Wesley was a conscientious tutor in Greek Testament but he also enjoyed a rich social life in Oxford and the Cotswolds. He began to think deeply about religion and spent hours in the Bodlien library, mulling things over and discovering new strands of Christian thought. A group of likeminded individuals began to meet together on a regular basis, forming what became known as a 'Holy Club'. It grew rapidly so that soon it included a member from almost every college in Oxford. The club met together to read, study scripture and undergo rigorous self-examination of their Christian lives. They would also take part in works of charity especially by preaching to prisoners in the city. In 1732, the term 'Methodists' was first coined to describe these men meeting in Oxford as it reflected the method and order of their lives. They tried to ensure that every hour of the day had its proper purpose.

Two of Wesley's siblings, Samuel and Charles, were also now at Oxford and **Samuel especially began to worry about John. He was concerned about John's yearning to reach Christian perfection, his stiff regulations and graveness.** The Dons in the Lincoln Common Room also began to talk about this 'sect' called the Methodists. Some unfavourable criticism followed and some defected from the society. John also began to lose his reputation as a tutor as students and parents feared indoctrination. In March 1733 he was even confronted by a mob at the gates of the college but this left him undeterred.

Wesley's father offered him the opportunity to take charge of his Parish but he felt he had more to do elsewhere. In 1735 he decided to become a missionary (chiefly to save his soul) and sailed with his brother Charles to the Americas. His mission was not as successful as he had hoped and he claimed of himself:

*"He who went to America to convert others was himself never converted to God."*

Wesley tormented himself with thoughts on faith and what it meant. Gradually his ideology began to change and he began to preach "salvation by faith alone" rather than "salvation through righteousness and good deeds". As with nearly all shifts in ideology, it was greeted with some apprehension.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Despite his preaching of this biblical, yet perceived as new, theology, Wesley’s personal story is filled with a kind of **striving** (note bold highlighted portion above). Again and again, he throws himself into his work and frequently chastises himself for his perceived failures.

His “conversion of the heart” appears in his diary on May 24, 1738, 7 years after his ordination.

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**THURSDAY**

Wesley’s journal for May 24, 1738 records the event this way:

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.

From the blog *Wesleyan Leadership: Faith Working Through Love:*

It was a conversion, but not in the sense we commonly understand. Aldersgate was not Wesley’s “conversion” to faith in Christ. He was a Christian all his life. Certainly, the months leading up to 24 May 1738 were a low period in his life. His recent experiences in Georgia, subsequent return to London, having to explain his actions to the authorities who sent him there, and his sense of failure caused Wesley to questioning his faith and standing as a Christian. Nevertheless, he never stopped being a Christian.

Thanks to his friend, the Moravian preacher Peter Bohler, Wesley received the support, counsel, and prayers he needed most at that low point in his life. Bohler helped Wesley receive his “conversion” experience at the Moravian Society meeting on 24 May 1738.

Wesley’s experience that night was a conversion in that it helped him get the order of salvation right. In the preceding years he believed that he had to be sanctified before God would accept him as a child of God. He believed that a person must be made holy before Christ would restore them to right relationship with God the Father. In other words, prior to his Aldersgate experience Wesley believed that sanctification preceded justification.

The experience on 24 May 1738 helped Wesley “convert” his understanding of the order of salvation. It made him realize that he had it all backwards. When he heard the person reading from Luther’s preface to the commentary on Romans Wesley realized that Christ alone makes him acceptable to God.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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**FRIDAY**

In the material for Wednesday and Thursday, the readings reveal a lot about Wesley’s striving to be what he thought God wanted him to be. His “conversion” experience helped him to see that God has done what is needed for our salvation – our discipleship is a response to that amazing act of love.

How does this story inform your own faith and discipleship?

~ Rev. Vivian McCarthy, Pastor

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September 13, 2015

1. Prayer for Every Day: Aldersgate Day or Sunday, Copyright © 1992 UMPH. Prayer, Copyright © 1964, 1965 Board of Publications of The Methodist Church, Inc.; alt. and Renewal © 1992 UMPH. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.linc.ox.ac.uk/Famous-AlumniJohn-Wesley-1703---1791 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://wesleyanleadership.com/2013/05/24/i-felt-i-did-trust-in-christ-christ-alone-for-salvation/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)