

Oct. 23, 2011          Wesley Wisdom: The Art of Living  
Psalm 16:5-11; Luke 17:20-21

"If there's a Rapture and no billboard announces it, has the world really ended?" That's how the Mercury News began it's article about the latest prediction of the beginning of the end by broadcast evangelist Harold Camping. I don't like to make fun of 90-year-olds. I'm more inclined to feel sorry for the former engineer whose end-time calculations have been wrong so many times. When the rapture didn't happen back in May, Camping suffered a stroke.

So that his followers don't have to suffer any more, I have some good news for them: You don't have to wait for the rapture. You don't have to spend your time and energy trying to predict when it's coming. In Luke's Gospel this morning, Jesus tells us, "The kindom of God is not coming with things that can be observed [or calculated]; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kindom of God is among you."

Scholars debate the meaning of his words, but I hear Jesus saying: "The kingdom of God is right here, right now because I am here right now." Where Christ is, there the kingdom is.

Our founder, John Wesley, said pretty much the same thing: Christ is eternal life, and Christ is right now the life of everything that lives. Eternal life begins, Wesley says, not when we die but when Christ is revealed in our hearts. That is when heaven is opened in the soul, when the love of God is poured into our hearts and then naturally flows out into the world.

[Sermon #77, "Spiritual Worship," 1780]

The kingdom of God is among us. It is that immediate, that available. So what prevents us from living there right now?

Popular Christian author Frederick Buechner says, "We think of Eternal Life, if we think of it at all, as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins." [Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*]

What happens, in Wesley's experience, is this: when eternal life begins, happiness begins. Psalm 16 has it that in God's presence there is fullness of joy. God is fully present in Christ. So, if you've got Christ, then you've got to be happy! Why, then, do we Christians do such a poor job of being happy? There is, of course, the problem of pursuing happiness in all the wrong places. Wesley describes the pleasure-seekers of his day: "A glutton, a drunkard, a gamester may be 'merry'; but he cannot be happy. The beau, the belle, may eat and drink, and rise up to play; but still they feel they are not happy. Men or women may adorn their own dear persons with all the colours of the rainbow. They may dance and sing, and hurry to and fro, and flutter hither and thither. They may roll up and down in their splendid carriages and talk insipidly to each other. They may hasten from one diversion to another; but happiness is not there." ["Spiritual Worship"] Substitute red sports car for splendid carriage and you get the message.

Now Wesley doesn't blame these poor souls for seeking happiness, only for seeking it where it can't be found. He says, "The best end which any creature can pursue is happiness in God." [ Sermon #6, "The Righteousness of Faith," 1746] True happiness is found "...when [Christ' has taken the full possession of our heart;...when we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us...then we are completely happy..." Wesley concludes then that ever Christian is happy, and anyone who is not happy is not, by definition, a Christian. ["Spiritual Worship"]

I don't think I'd have to go beyond this room to find some Christians who aren't very happy. But that is because most of us think that happiness is a way of feeling rather than a way of being. For Wesley, happiness is the same thing as holiness. It doesn't mean that we are always in a state of euphoria, that we are never distressed or down-trodden. It doesn't mean that we are happy-go-lucky or that we never have trials and tribulations and never are tempted. But it does mean that we

are, with God's grace, through all those difficulties, gradually learning and mastering the art of living. Holiness is more like wholeness than holier-than-thou-ness. And when we practice holiness, we will come to know the fullness of joy. When happiness becomes a way of being and not just a way of feeling, then we have become a work of art.

This sermon is entitled "The Art of Living" for a reason. Early in Wesley's life, he had a slightly morbid fascination with dying. Maybe it was that narrow escape from the parsonage fire when he was six years old that did it. Or maybe it was that in the eighteenth century there was always someone around you that was dying. At any rate, as a student at Oxford, he studied what was known as the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying, and we'll talk about that next week. But as a preacher and a spectacularly successful evangelist, Wesley became an even greater advocate for the art of living. He wrote sermons on just about every aspect of life: sermons on matters of faith and

morals, sermons on the use of money, on stewardship of time, on proper dress, on the education of children, and—a personal favorite of mine—on obedience to pastors. Wesley wanted to help his people master the art of living. And whoever gets it right has a special title. In the church, "saint" is the very ancient and much-maligned term for those who practice holiness and live happiness. Wesley was in the business of growing saints.

The saints of the church are those for whom eternal life has already begun. They are the ones who have embodied a little bit of heaven here on earth and teach us, by their example, the art of living. In their daily routine, they live by a different set of rules than the rest of us. Our lives are determined—more than we'd like to admit—by the messed-up values and priorities of this screwed-up world we live in. We are, most of us, products of our culture and time. But the saints are different. They live with both feet in eternity. Like Francis of Assisi,

Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu. Eternal life began for them as soon as they received Christ into their hearts and heaven was opened in their souls and they started living God's presence among us.

Martin Luther King, Jr. now has a monument on the Washington Mall. It is literally a mountain of of a monument. But long before his figure was finally carved into stone, long before he died, before the march on Washington, the marches in Selma and Montgomery, King was "walking in eternity." That's what Wesley would have called it anyway. Believers, he says, live in eternity and walk in eternity. And so, their spiritual and moral horizons are much broader because their vision is no longer bound by the rules of this world as they've been dictated to us. They have a dream. The difference is that their dream is already a reality for them. They are living in the world not as it is, but as it should be.

"Faith," as Wesley says, "places the unseen, the eternal world, continually before [the believer's] face. Consequently [they look] not at the things that are seen'...'but at the things that are not seen'; at the favour, the image, and the glory of God." [Sermon, "On Eternity"]

I'm no Martin Luther King or any of the other masters of the art of living. And I have doubts about my ability to live with both feet in eternity. But perhaps I might be able to put one foot there. Wesley wrote a sermon just for me.

You see, when Wesley was young and fired up, he divided the church into two distinct camps: the "almost Christians" who are going to hell and the "altogether Christians" who are heading for heaven. But as he got older, Wesley got a little more mellow. And he came to the mature realization that there are degrees of sainthood. There are those who have both feet in eternity and those who may just put a big toe in once in a while.

So, he wrote a sermon called, "The More Excellent Way." He wrote it not to condemn us for not being Martin Luther King or Gandhi or Mother Teresa. He wrote first to assure us that God is well pleased with our sincere, though imperfect obedience, and then to prod and encourage us smaller saints to step up a little higher. His sermon gives advice to the average Christian for their average day. He figured, if we could only be more aware of God's presence daily, hourly, then we could, in small ways, be more of a sign of God's presence to everyone around us. And where God is, heaven is. Remember: the kingdom of God is among you.

Wesley takes an average day. First, he advises his followers on how much sleep they need to promote the health of body and mind: men, 6-7 hours; women, 7-8. Sounds a little sexist, but on this point, I'll give him a pass! Rise early. Sleeping in invites sloth. Take up your cross and get out of bed. Christ and not that cup of coffee will give you new life. Next, it's time

for morning prayer. You can use the same ol' memorized prayers from childhood. But the more excellent way is to openly and earnestly pour out your soul to God. Then go about your daily business. Doing work to provide for your family is good. But working to please God, doing works for eternity, is even better. Working diligently is good, but even honest heathens do that. Add piety to your honest. Be honest and fair, but also be merciful. In other words, mix the prayer of the heart with the work of your hands. Do everything in the Spirit of Christ and not in the spirit of this world. Tell that to your employer at your next performance review.

When you have to stop and eat, say a prayer of blessing before and a prayer of thanksgiving after. Eat plain, cheap, wholesome food, and do it with cheerfulness. Turkey and swiss again! And while at table, converse with one another to refresh your minds as well as your body. Those other people who live in your household, eat with them once in a while! Put down that

cell phone, that newspaper. Turn off the TV! And make sure everything you say is edifying.

Still, our bodies and minds require some relaxation. Take your periods of recreation as needed but don't waste your time in the English theatre. (I can only imagine what he'd think about Hollywood.) A more excellent way to rejuvenate yourself would be to spend your time gardening, talking with your neighbors, visiting the sick, the poor, the orphans and widows. Or else, read useful history, conduct a science experiment, listen to music.

In his last advice for your day, Wesley says: use all your money for God and whatever you have beyond your basic needs, give away. Some of you heard that sermon last week. In a nutshell, Wesley wondered why we spend our money in a way that God will possibly forgive, rather than in a way that God will surely reward. "Every pound you put into the earthly bank is sunk: it brings no interest above. But every pound you give to

the poor is put into the bank of heaven. And it will bring glorious interest; yea, and such as will be accumulating to all eternity." [Sermon #89, "The More Excellent Way," 1787]

This all may not sound like a description of eternal life or the kingdom of God, but it's a pretty good start on it, for us little saints, that is. As the 19th-century novelist Thomas Hardy once wrote: "The main object of religion is not to get a man into Heaven; but to get Heaven into him." So Wesley is just trying to get heaven into us. He's trying to instill in us the holiness that is the only way to happiness. What is the kingdom of God, Paul says, but "righteousness and peace and joy in the Spirit." [Romans 14:17] If we walk in righteousness (or justice), we walk in peace. If we walk in peace, we walk in joy. If we walk in joy, we're walking with Jesus and that means we're walking in eternity. St. Catherine of Siena said, "All the way to Heaven is Heaven."

So I say: you don't have to die to get there. Where God is, that's where heaven is. And God is here now. Heaven can be here now. Eternity isn't what happens when life ends but what happens when life begins. Go on. Just stick your big toe out in it.