

Wesley Wisdom: Introduction to John Wesley
Psalm 42; Philippians 4:8-9

I went to seminary at what could be considered the Mecca of Methodism: Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina. Still tottering around in the library was a very old Frank Baker, editor-in-chief of the new scholarly edition of the *Works of John Wesley*. I couldn't have cared less. At the time, I was fired up by feminist theology and Latin American liberation theology. So how could I possibly have been interested in an 18th-century evangelist whose legacy was clearly owned and operated by a bunch of Bible-belt Methodists? There I was, coordinator of the Women's Center, caught in the culture wars going on in my denomination, and branded a campus radical. I guess I was. I can remember asking my seminary roommate if it was OK to wear pants to church. It was not a happy time. And I regret to say that I left seminary having a much better idea of what I didn't believe than what I did.

Fast-forward seven years. I was back in school at the GTU in Berkeley, an ecumenical consortium of nine seminaries and assorted

religious institutes. Politically, culturally, and spiritually, about as far from Methodist Mecca as you can get. I was now surrounded by a motley crew of Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Unitarians, you name it. I was studying systematic theology, and hoping to find my theological voice. It wasn't enough to know what I didn't believe. I was compelled to examine much more carefully and learn to articulate what I did believe.

I never would have believed that the one theologian who would help me make the most sense of who I was and what I stood for was John Wesley. I found that I kept coming back to him as I thought my way through the kinds of debates that theologians get into, debates about the nature of sin and grace, faith and works, religion and science, Christ and culture.

Getting Wesley out of the Methodist ghetto and putting him in a more ecumenical conversation helped me to see him in a much broader and more useful light. That richer conversation helped me to hold fast to whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just,

whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable in the faith of our founder. The more I read about him and his thinking, the better I understood my own. I realized that what I'd been doing, what I'd been believing all along, were—in significant ways—things that somehow I had learned and received and heard and seen in the life and thought of John Wesley.

In a sense, I rediscovered my theological family tree, and even better than the degree, I got a new sense of my theological identity: where I came from, how I got here, who I am and may become. So, over the next several weeks, the question I have for you will be: is John Wesley a part of your theological genealogy? The answer may surprise you, just as it surprised me. But first, we need a little history.

How many of you went through a Methodist confirmation class? If you did, you probably had an obligatory session on John Wesley. And you probably learned all kinds of statistics that make Wesley into a mountain of a man. For most Methodists, Wesley

becomes a kind of super-hero Christian, one that no one could really learn from because no one could ever live up to. Though the statistics are breathtaking, that's not the kind of story I want to tell. I want to tell you a story about a real man whose failures were as real as his many successes; a man whose soul was cast down until God lifted him up; a man who no matter what, kept his hope in God.

John Wesley was born in 1703. Eight years ago I went to a scholar's conference in Manchester to celebrate his tercentenary. John was a preacher's kid. His father, Samuel, was a harsh and unpopular priest in the rural parish of Epworth, England. So harsh that his parishioners burned his crops and maimed his livestock. And they probably set fire to the parsonage when John was six. As the last child to leave the burning building, John narrowly escaped with his life, having to exit through a second-story window, just seconds before the roof collapsed. He often called himself "a brand plucked from the burning", which was a reference to the Hebrew prophets, Amos and Zechariah.

But the real defining influence on his early life was another kind of fire, the one burning inside his mother, Susannah. Talk about a super-mom. Samuel would be gone for long stretches at a time, but somehow Susannah managed to have 19 children. Ten survived. By today's measure, Susannah ran her home like a boot camp. Still, she loved her children. A very well read woman, she schooled them all and managed to instill in each a profound religious sensibility.

Even after John left home, it was Susannah who kept up the theological discussions with her son, on a surprisingly sophisticated level. It was Susannah who started preaching to her neighbors on Sunday evenings when Samuel was away, drawing more folks to her Bible talks than attended Sunday morning services. As the story goes, some 200 would gather in the parsonage kitchen. [No way. I've seen that parsonage kitchen.] Her husband heard of it and tried to forbid it. But nothing doing.

John would take that religious resolve to Oxford University where he began what was supposed to be a conventional career

path into academia. But John and his brother Charles, the poet, were different. They didn't fit in. They were too earnest. They were a little fanatic about their faith. They started a Holy Club and quickly became the butt of their classmates' jokes. They were just too austere and too methodical in their lifestyle.

And they mixed too much with the lower classes. They fasted twice a week and with the money they saved, they fed and clothed the hungry. They visited prisoners in the poorhouses, taught them how to read, worked to pay off their debts and found them work when they were released. They didn't make a lot of friends at school because they made the other students all look like backsliders. Even if all the students at Oxford were good folks and lived pious lives, they were but "almost Christian." By Wesley's reckoning, there was hardly anyone, himself included, who could honestly claim the name.

During this time John was ordained, and in 1735, he and Charles sailed off to Georgia to save the Indians from the fires of hell. When they arrived in Savannah, they discovered that there were few

Indians (they'd been mostly killed off by small pox), but there was a small Anglican congregation there. So, John went about trying to translate his holy club experience to the wilds of the new world. And it didn't work. His Georgia trip was an unmitigated disaster. The rough and tumble settlers couldn't live up to his lofty expectations.

Not even the one he considered marrying, Sophia Hopkey, niece of the colony's chief magistrate. When he finally decided that he should remain celibate in order to serve God, Sophey up and married someone else. Hurt and angry, the Rev. Wesley refused her communion the next time she was in church. Then all hell broke loose. Warrants were issued for his arrest. In the midst of the furor, he escaped to South Carolina and jumped a boat back to England.

John came back home, with a broken heart and spirit. His experiment in super-righteous living had failed superbly. His feeble attempts at intimacy had failed as well. And now, back in London, his faith was failing him. He turned to a Moravian by the name of Peter Böhler. He had met some of these German Christians on the voyage

to America. He learned their hymns and was impressed by their steady faith during a storm at sea. In London, he confessed to Böhler that he himself didn't have an ounce of faith left and that he should probably quit the ministry. Böhler told him: "Preach faith until you have it. Then, because you have it, you will preach faith."

Not long after, on May 24, 1738, Wesley was attending a Bible study on Aldersgate Street. He was listening to someone read from Luther's commentary on the Book of Romans and he felt his cold heart grow strangely warm. He felt, down deep in his bones, for perhaps the first time, that God really loved him, miserable failure of a clergyman he had been. He learned on a level he had never known before that it isn't how righteously you live that makes God love you, but the fact that God loves you empowers you to live rightly.

Wesley's conversion experience has been the founding Methodist myth. Not myth as in "not true," but myth as in "self-defining moment" for the movement. Aldersgate was really only one of several conversions in Wesley's life, but it does mark a radical

change in direction. His experiences of failure and forgiveness were truly transformational. Wesley was now a whole new kind of preacher. He left the rigidity of his father's pastoral theology and the safety of his father's parish position. More like his mother preaching in the parsonage kitchen, he began to break the rules. Because of his evangelical fervor, Wesley was barred from most English pulpits. So, against all English customs, Wesley began preaching out of doors. Against the Book of Common Prayer, he prayed extemporaneously. Against a hide-bound state Church that existed to serve the aristocracy, he brought the Gospel to the very people that the Church refused to minister to: the dislocated masses of poor people in early industrial England.

After Samuel's death, Wesley was barred from his father's old pulpit by the new rector at Epworth. So that evening, Wesley preached, standing on his father's grave. Freud would have had a field day with that one! Then he took his message of God's acceptance and love to miners in Wales, poor farmers in Ireland, and

unemployed workers in his native England. Here come the statistics. Estimates are that in his lifetime of service, Wesley travelled 200,000 miles, mostly by horseback. He preached 40,000 sermons. At the time of his death, the Methodist movement claimed 71,668 members in Great Britain and 43,265 members in America. Even then, Methodists were meticulous record-keepers.

The basic organizing unit of the Methodist movement and the key to Wesley's genius was the class meeting. Class meetings were small groups that met to keep members spiritually accountable to one another and to their covenant with God. They were led almost entirely by lay people and supported by a network of itinerant lay preachers. This is how Methodism spread like a wildfire across the frontiers of this country. It's the most stunningly successful example of small group ministry in modern church history. And the Methodists were doing it long before any of the mega churches today.

What about this church? Does Wesley have any wisdom for us? I hope Wesley has some courage for us. At a time when women were to cover their heads and keep quiet in church, Wesley allowed women to lead and to preach, because he thought of his movement as a new movement of the Spirit, a latter-day Pentecost, like the one in the Book of Acts, where the Spirit was being poured out on both men and women, and daughters as well as sons could prophesy [Acts 2:17-18].

What we need in the United Methodist Church is another Pentecost. Who, for instance, is being barred from preaching in our pulpits today? And what do you think Wesley would say?

As Wesley preached freedom in Christ, another liberation movement was going on in Europe and in the English colonies. It was the birth of democracy. Now Wesley was too much a Tory to support the American Revolution. Besides, King George had saved his bacon. When local clergy incited riots against him—Wesley was

stoned many times—and when his Methodists were mobbed and harassed, King George issued an order for their protection.

If Wesley was no democrat, then, at least he wasn't a hypocrite. When the Tea Partiers were crying: "Give me liberty or give me death!" Wesley wrote a letter to the colonies and asked: how can you call it democracy when only landowners can vote? And how can you say you value freedom above all else when you yourselves own slaves? Pretty smart man, this Wesley. He saw that American reality didn't live up to all that rebel rhetoric. Some things never change. The church of John Wesley should have the courage to speak truth to rebels and to rulers.

John Wesley was a strong voice against slavery, but not strong enough. And he didn't live long enough. The first rule books for American Methodists prohibited slaveholding. But the ban was widely ignored after Wesley's death in 1791. At the age of 88, just a few days before he died, Wesley wrote his last letter to a member of the English parliament, William Wilberforce, encouraging him to keep up

his fight against the slave trade. American Methodists split North and South over the issue in 1844 and did not reunite until 1938. Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of a Methodist's week. Curiously that wasn't true of the Methodists in northern Marin, but it is true here. We have work to do.

The journey goes on. And those who claim to be Wesley's theological descendants are in the business of keeping on—sometimes timidly—doing the things that we have learned and received and seen and heard in him. I'll share more about him and, more importantly, what he thought and taught, in the coming weeks. And I will ask you to let go of all that is unhelpful, but hold fast to whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing and commendable. Because Wesley was, if anything, steadfastly faithful to the end. And in that, he was not an almost but an altogether Christian. From his deathbed, nearly his last words were these: "The best of all is, God is with us!" I hope to end my life with those words on my lips.

Meanwhile, you can read them at the bottom of my email. Until next week: may God be with you.