

Our Next Faithful Step: Our Wesleyan Heritage

1 John 3:16-24

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

June 20, 2021

Around 11:30 one February night, eleven year old Hetty woke up from a sound sleep when burning pieces of roof began falling on her bed. Of course, she was terrified and she ran to tell her father that the house was on fire. Meanwhile, he had woken up to the sound of someone crying out “Fire!” from the yard outside his window. He opened the bedroom door and saw flames consuming the hallway. The burning roof was collapsing fast, so the family had little time to escape. He woke his wife, and she and two of their daughters made their way outside to the garden. A servant broke a window and climbed out with Hetty and her sister. Soon, the family was gathering outdoors safe from the flames when they realized that the five-year-old, Jacky, was missing. Their father went back into the house over and over again trying to get to his son but without success. The last time he returned to the garden, he cried out for everyone present to pray for God to receive Jacky’s soul.

And then a miracle occurred. Jacky appeared in an upstairs window. One of the family’s neighbors climbed on the shoulders of another and pulled Jacky out. Frightened but safe, he ran to his family and together they watched as their home burned to the ground.

It was a life-changing, life-shaping experience for that little boy. For the rest of her life, his mother would say he was a brand plucked from the burning house for some special purpose. And indeed, she was right. Little Jacky grew up to be John Wesley, and we are the heirs of the religious movement he started - a movement called Methodism which quite literally changed the world.

Last week, we started a three-part sermon series entitled “Our Next Faithful Step”. Over the last fifteen months, we have been through a traumatic experience that has, undoubtedly, changed us and our community. This feels like an important time for us to listen to God and discern what God is calling us to do to make a difference in the world. We are a faithful church. What is our next faithful step in being part of God’s kingdom-building work in our community and world? Whenever we’re trying to discern God’s call - whether individually or as a congregation - it can be helpful to look at our story so far and ask “What makes up our identity, our values, and our gifts and how has God used them up until now?” So, last week I talked about who we are as Christians and why God created the church. This week I’d like to explore who we are as Methodists and what we have inherited from the little boy plucked out of the fire.

John Wesley was born in 1703 and lived to see most of the 18th century as it played out in his home country of England. He was the fifteenth child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley, and his father was an Anglican priest in the little town of Epworth. Samuel was rigid and judgmental and deeply disliked by his congregation. In fact, most scholars believe the fire was started by some of his parishioners. He also struggled financially, built up a great deal of debt, and spent time in Debtors Prison while John was growing up. John’s mother, Susanna, placed a great deal of value on education and taught all of her children, sometimes one at a time, in the family kitchen. The lessons always included Bible study and faith formation.

In 1720, John left Epworth and enrolled in Christ Church College at Oxford University. There, he and a few friends established the Holy Club, a group of young men who took a holistic approach to growing in faith. They studied the Bible, worshiped, and prayed together, and they also went out to visit prisoners, care for the poor and elderly, and teach children together. They had such a well thought out method for learning and growing together that other students teased them calling them “the Methodists”. This little group was the incubator for what became the Methodist movement.

John Wesley never intended to start a new Protestant denomination. He simply wanted to reform the Church of England. England in the 18th century was deeply divided economically. The wealthy had access to education, medical care, housing, and food. Meanwhile, the vast majority of people were poor. Some worked in the fields, others in the coal mines, others not at all. Their children didn’t have schools, and they certainly didn’t get the medical care they needed.

Wesley began to realize that the Church of England was failing to reach out to people in need and to help people grow in faith. Catering to the rich, they excluded anyone of a different class, race, or ethnicity. The worship services were long, dry, and elitist. So, Wesley began to travel around the country preaching outside the coal mines or in the farmers’ field, teaching outdoors and welcoming everyone, and starting small groups like his Holy Club where people could learn about faith and hold each other accountable.

One of Wesley’s favorite books of the Bible was First John because of its emphasis on love and action. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

From the beginning, Wesley taught that to grow in faith and love we need to do works of piety - reading the Bible, worshiping, taking Communion, praying, singing - as well as works of mercy - feeding the hungry, visiting prisoners, taking care of the sick and advocating for justice. He also called this personal holiness and social holiness and is famous for saying there is no holiness without social holiness believing that social holiness is our inevitable response to the time we spend praying, worshiping, and reading scripture. So, how do we live a life of both personal and social holiness? Perhaps you’ve heard this quote from Wesley. "Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can."

For Wesley, social holiness was doing whatever possible to help someone else, and that included actual hands-on service as well as advocating for social justice. As Dr. JoAnn Lyons, a scholar out of the Wesleyan church puts it, "...healing not just people, but broken systems that oppressed people.”

While Wesley is certainly remembered for the many ways he acted in service to others, including starting schools and health clinics, he was also widely-known for using his gifts of writing and biblical scholarship to address social and political issues of his day. In his tract entitled *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, he made a powerful and pointed biblical and philosophical argument against slavery and ended it with a direct call to merchants and shipping companies to take a stand against “execrable sum of all villainies”.

According to Wesley scholar, David Field, “Wesley's contribution to the struggle against slavery did not end with the publication of *Thoughts Upon Slavery* - he continued to condemn slavery as the major sin of the British nation. He became a supporter of the Society for Abolition of the Slave Trade when it was founded in 1787. He used the *Arminian Magazine* - which he published as a means of instructing and encouraging his followers - to persuade Methodists to oppose slavery, to support the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and to petition parliament to end slavery.”

In many ways, the church and society that Wesley knew were not so different from the circumstances in which we live today. Like 18th century England, our country is dealing with a significant split between the wealthy and the poor, great inequality in the distribution of resources, lack of access to education and health care among the poor and the marginalized, and institutions and systems that have been built to perpetuate racism. Like the Anglican Church of Wesley's time, many churches in the U.S. today are becoming increasingly stagnant, focusing inwardly on the people already there rather than reaching out to meet the needs of others.

So, what does all of this history of Methodism tell us about our church and our next faithful step in cultivating God's kingdom? One thing that is clear is that if we follow in the Wesleyan tradition, whatever our next faithful step is it must include both opportunities for personal holiness and social holiness, works of piety and works of mercy. To be relevant in the spiritual formation experiences we offer, we need to be talking to each other and to our community. That will help us understand what people need for meaningful connections with God as well what our neighbors and community need to address problems of poverty, illness including mental illness, and all the phobias and isms that we face. Finally, we can't be afraid to advocate for those people who have the least power in our communities, to walk alongside them, and offer ourselves as allies and support.

We have a proud heritage as Methodists - one that runs deep both in personal and social holiness. Of course, over the centuries, Methodists have also lost their way at times. We've entwined our churches in systemic racism and, at the moment, we are on the verge of schism over LGBTQ+ inclusion. Yet, I believe that our church, First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor, can seize this opportunity - this time of coming together and considering our next faithful step - to reclaim our Wesleyan roots. As we look to the future, we can be leaders in our community and denomination in both love and action. I can't wait to see where God leads us!

May it be so! Amen!