

“CHRISTIANITY THE WESLEYAN WAY (#1):
JOURNEYING WITH JOHN WESLEY”

(Romans 3:21-26)

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(*) = Slide in PowerPoint Presentation (if applicable)

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 1-8-23]

--I--

1. [BOTH Services] Read CEB Text: Romans 3:21-26 and Pray.
2. What exactly IS a Methodist Christian? *Where* did we come from? *What* do we believe? And *how* do we practice our faith?

A--Over the next six weeks, these are some of the questions we're going to be talking about in a new worship series called "*Christianity the Wesleyan Way*" in which we'll be exploring our uniqueness as Wesleyan/Methodist Christians, and the difference I think that that can make both in *our* lives and the lives of *others* in today's world. ¹

1--Now, there are some who'll say, "*But Pastor, I don't really want to be 'Methodist,' 'Baptist,' or anything else. I just want to be a 'Christian.'*" ²

2--That's great! I wouldn't want it any other way, because when we all get to heaven, God's not going to ask us what denomination we belonged to anyway.

B--But if you're hearing this sermon, you're not there *yet*. So what we need to understand in the meantime is that spiritual labels / categories that we commonly use (like "Methodist," "Baptist," "R.Catholic", "Presbyterian") are merely short-hand ways (adjectives) to describe what *kind* of Christian we are -- they give us a "handle" on the unique aspects of *what* we believe and *how* we practice Christian faith. ³

C--So, my goal in this series is not to make us into "good little United Methodists," but simply to help *all* of us be *great* Christians.

3. In fact, for about 35 million believers around the world, the "handle" or tradition called "Wesleyan" (or "Methodist", in its differing forms) seems to *best* fit our identity as followers of Jesus Christ (whether UMC, GMC, AME, Ch.of the Nazarene, or Salv. Army). ⁴

(*) A--It's a tradition began with the life and ministry of an 18th-century priest of the Church of England named of John Wesley (which is why we're called *Wesleyan* Christians).

B--So today, I want to begin by taking a "*Journey*" with John Wesley, learning how God's grace (described in today's scripture from Romans 3) worked through the life and ministry of this man to begin a Christian movement which continues today. ⁵

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- (*4. It all started in England on June 28, 1703, when John was born in Epworth, England as the 15th child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley (of which there were 19 total!).

[If applicable... DADDY INTERRUPTS SERVICE w/Character Portrayal of J.W...]

- (*A--From a very young age, it seemed as if John was destined for something great, such as when he narrowly escaped death during a house-fire when he was 5 years old.

B--In the nick of time, he was pulled from his second floor window as the roof caved in, causing his mother later to remark that she believed John had been spared from the flame for some great purpose -- that he was "*a brand plucked from the burning.*"

- (*5. After going off to college in 1725 and following in his father's footsteps to become a priest of the Church of England, he became convinced that the way to Christian salvation was through "holy living" -- loving God by doing *good deeds for others*.

(*A--This belief led he and his brother Charles (the author of over 6000 hymns, including *Christ the Lord is Risen Today* and *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!*) to form a religious society dedicated to radical devotion to God and service to the poor.

B--Other students laughed at them and derisively called them the "*Holy Club*", "*Enthusiasts*", "*Bible Moths*", "*Sacramentarians*,"⁶ and since they were so precise, orderly, and *methodical* about everything they did, "*Method-ists.*"

C--And yet, despite all his discipline and good works, Wesley was unsatisfied with his faith -- something, he felt, was missing.

- (*6. So, in 1735, he traveled with General James Oglethorpe to serve as missionary chaplain to the colonists and native people of a backwater military buffer colony called "Georgia."

(*A--But his two years here were a disaster as he tried to impose his strict discipline on everyone -- one colonist wrote "*I'd rather spend the rest of my days rotting in a debtor's prison in England than be sentenced to the hell of Wesley's salvation.*"

B--And after a failed courtship with a young lady, Wesley was eventually run out of Savannah and returned to England feeling lost, dejected, and close to what we would today call a "nervous breakdown."

C--In his Journal, he wrote: "*I went to convert the Indians; But oh, who shall convert me?*"

- (*7. And yet, on his way TO America, he had been impressed by the fervent Christianity of a group of Germans from Moravia (anybody ever been to Winston-Salem, N.C.?)

A--His friendship with several of them helped him to discover that biblical Christian faith was more than mere good works and strict discipline, but rather was found **in a heartfelt, personal trust** in Jesus Christ.

- (*) B--And so it was that on May 24, 1738 at a prayer meeting in London (a few blocks away from what is now the British Museum), Wesley experienced something profound. In his journal, he wrote these now famous words:

*"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society on 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 my salvation; & an assurance was given me that He had taken away **my** sins, even **mine**, and saved **me** from the law of sin and death."*

8. Following Aldersgate, Wesley tried to preach this Christianity of **personal** faith in the established Anglican churches, but soon found himself turned out of many of them;

- (*) A--So, when the educated clergy and sophisticated laity wouldn't listen, he decided that "*the world is my parish*," and -- with the encouragement of evangelist George Whitefield -- he began sharing his message of personal faith out in public wherever he could draw a crowd: in England's city streets and fields, and in factories, slums, and coal mines -- sometimes to crowds as large as 20,000 or more!

- (*) B--And when some of Wesley's new converts desired to grow further in their new faith, he organized them into small groups for prayer, Bible study, personal sharing, and mission work, led by committed *laypeople*, and by *women* (both unheard of in the 1700s) -- these groups ("Classes" & "Bands") became the backbone of the Methodism.

9. Yet, despite their personal faith, neither Wesley nor his Methodists abandoned the doing of good deeds -- they mere became a response to salvation, rather than a door to it. ⁷

A--And so, his Methodists...

- (*) 1--Opened homes for widows and orphanages for children.
- 2--Made regular practice of visiting those in prison.
- 3--Opened credit unions and collected and disbursed funds for the poor.
- (*) 4--Opened schools for children, giving impetus to the drive for popular education.
- 5--They sponsored literacy classes & taught skills for small-businesses.
- 6--And they even operated several free and low-cost medical clinics for those who couldn't afford high medical costs.

B--And in addition to his religious writings, Wesley himself wrote many tracts for the poor to help with education, medical assistance, relaxation, & other topics.

- (*) C--In fact, his most popular-selling book, Primitive Physick, was *not* a religious book at all, but an inexpensive medical guide of home-remedies -- ever heard the phrase "*Cleanliness is next to godliness?*" That was John Wesley in Primitive Physick!

10. Now, despite their successes, both Wesley and his Methodists also faced controversy for a variety of reasons.

(*) A--For one thing, to many people the practice of preaching outside, instead of inside the officially sanctioned Anglican churches, was vulgar and unrefined.

B--And unlike most clergymen of his day, Wesley took a stand in vehemently opposing slavery & the slave trade -- a position not popular with the influential slave merchants.

C--He preached against the misuse and dangers of alcohol, which made him unpopular with tavern owners.

D--And he was also criticized for his use of lay people & women both in preaching and as leaders of Methodist small groups. ⁸

(*) E--And the result was that in some cases, Wesley and his Methodists were physically attacked when they tried to preach or hold meetings, and were constantly satirized and made fun of by the Press and by the elite & educated of society.

(*) 11. Nevertheless, after a number of Methodists immigrated to America and took their new faith along with them, Wesley sent eventually clergy along to assist them.

(*) A--And in 1784, after the American Revolution, he gave permission for the Methodists here to elect a "superintendent" (or "Bishop," as they came to be known) and to form an new, independent Methodist Episcopal Church in American.

B--By the time of his death in 1791, Wesley had traveled over 250,000 miles and preached nearly 44,000 sermons!

(*) C--And today, over 35 million Christians around the world (including we as U.Meths.) trace our spiritual roots through the life and ministry of John Wesley, including over 20 million Christians here in America in over 25 "Wesleyan" denominations (not all of which have "Methodist" in their name -- like the Salvation Army & Church of the Nazarene, etc.).

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12. Now, I/we shared all of this with you today not just to give a history lesson, but to remind each of us of how powerfully God can use ONE PERSON to change the world.

A--No. Wesley was no saint -- he had imperfections and shortcomings like the rest of us.

B--But when he finally discovered that spiritual contentment was NOT found in doing good *things* but in living life as a faithful response to God's free *grace* spoken of in today's Romans 3 scripture, his life changed forever -- and so can ours!

C--So, are you today trying to find contentment in life by doing *good things*? Or, like Wesley, have you discovered how to live life as a faithful *response* to God's *grace*?

D--The difference between the TWO makes all the difference in the WORLD!

13. [PRAYER... *for persons who have searched for meaning and purpose from life in all places but God to invite Christ into their heart to have a "vital piety," just as John Wesley did...*]
14. [Closing 11am hymn: ("*For the Anniversary of One's Conversion*": UMH#57, "O For A Thousand Tongues"]

ENDNOTES:

¹ Some who are hearing or reading this sermon may be exploring Christianity for the first time before making a commitment. Others are new Christians who are new not only to *this* church but to *any* church. Still others of you have been members of this or another Methodist church all your life, but have never really known what a *Methodist* Christian really is. But regardless of how you got here, there was obviously *something* about the way we do things here that drew you here. And it's my belief that as we learn about our spiritual heritage, we'll discover that that "something" more than likely is attributed to our heritage and practice as Wesleyan Christians, meaning that as we explore that heritage, we'll learn about ourselves and how our own spiritual tradition can make a positive difference in our everyday lives.

I realize that those of you who are current LaGrange First UMC members more than likely didn't decide to become a member *because* it was a United Methodist Church. In fact, some of you probably became members *in spite of* the fact that it was a United Methodist Church (and I'm glad you did)! But the reality is that we can't really effectively understand our own identity either as individual Christians or as a corporate church unless we first understand the spiritual heritage that drew us here in the first place.

² In fact, this is one concept that John Wesley (founder of Methodism) used to describe the early Methodists – they weren't "Presbyterians" or "Roman Catholics" or "Anglicans"; they were simply "Christians" [See his tract "*The Character of A Methodist*"]. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul faced a similar situation in his work with the Christians at Corinth [Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17].

³ This is true even of so-called "non-denominational" or "independent" churches. The fact that they claim not to be connected with any "official" denomination does *not* mean they believe and/or practice a non-sectarian / generic Christian faith. It simply means that they have not chosen to *call* themselves by the type of Christian faith that they practice.

⁴ No, it's not the *only* biblical "handle", and it's not inherently "better" or "more spiritual" than any other Christian "handle" or tradition. But it's one that does help *us* to understand, define and articulate *our* practice of Christian faith more clearly.

⁵ Today's scripture from Romans 3 was the scripture that was being read and interpreted to John Wesley at a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London in 1738 during which he had his now famous "heart warming" experience, marking his heart-conversion.

⁶ This because they received the "sacrament" of Holy Communion/Lord's Supper every Sunday, when a "good Anglican" of that day and time was only required to receive this sacrament three times per year!

⁷ Too often today, evangelism and missions/social work are often treated as opposites -- but Wesley believed that biblically, these two go hand in hand.

⁸ He was called everything from a "*Papist*" (in a day when Roman Catholics were not well-liked in England) to an "*open enemy of Christ*" by the Moravians after he split with them over theological issues.