



9:30 AM - WESLEY CHAPEL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
3519 Urbana Pike, Frederick, Md 21704
Church Phone: 301-663-4956
WCUMC.Urbana@gmail.com
Website: <https://wesleychapelurbana.com/>
Music Minister: Jean Wood

11:00 AM - CLARKSBURG UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
23425 Spire St., Clarksburg, Maryland
<https://www.facebook.com/clarksburgmdumc/>
Accompanist: Rick Beede
Choir Director: Cathy Warfield

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER APRIL 28, 2024 9:30 AM
HERITAGE SUNDAY (A MONTH EARLY)

FIRST LESSON

Acts 8:26–40

Philip helps someone from Ethiopia

GOSPEL

John 15:1–8

Christ is the vine; We are the branches

EPISTLE 1 John 4:7–21

We love because He first loved us.

SERMON

“Perfect Love” (to spread scriptural holiness)

“On Heritage Sunday, United Methodists honor their past and envision their future.” The timing, the third Sunday in May, is linked to John Wesley’s “Aldersgate experience” on May 24, 1738. That was a watershed moment for John Wesley.

Wesley saw himself, up until that point, as doing the best he could to do the work of God, with the faith of a servant. After that evening, Wesley said he could work with the faith of a son. The difference was in his experiencing “assurance of salvation”, a subjective sense that God’s grace was really and truly for him personally, not just for humankind in the abstract or the aggregate.

Heritage Sunday - Honoring our past, and envisioning our future: I think that honoring our past may be done through considering each of our scriptures this week, and that they also can help us envision what God’s future for us.

The Wesleys had intended their work to bring new life, renewal, to the church of England, which they felt had a form of religion but had lost its power.

Wesley was not against outward decorum and a beautiful liturgy. He genuinely loved the Anglican liturgy and the Book of Common Prayer. But forms are only forms.

“Supposing these [forms] to be ever so decent and significant, ever so expressive of inward things,” Wesley said, they would still not avail. “The religion of Christ rises infinitely higher, and lies immensely deeper, than all these.”

*The Way to the Kingdom by John Wesley, par 4
as quoted by ~ Fred Sanders,*

<https://scriptoriumdaily.com/heart-religion-wesley-on-the-christian-life/>

In the Gospel, we are commanded by Christ to remain in him, because he is the source of our life.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

*For Wesley, the turning point at which he found his ministry begin to become fruitful was at Aldersgate. Wesley had been questioning his own faith, after having had a disastrous experience in the colonies, and traumatizing journeys to and from. One good thing from his adventure to North America was his encounter with a group of Moravians, who unlike others on the ship, were **not** in fear for their lives during a threatening storm, but instead were involved in prayers and singing hymns of praise to God. They knew something of faith that he wished to discover, so he sought to learn more.*

For those who know little or nothing about it, John Wesley narrates how he had been urged by some friends to join them in attending a Moravian meeting ...

“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.”

Aldersgate... when he felt his heart “strangely warmed” and “felt” assured of his salvation.

For the man from Ethiopia, it was a reading from the prophet Isaiah, as explained by a christian named Philip. For John Wesley, it was the letter to the Romans, as being explained by Martin Luther and read aloud by a Moravian christian.

*The scriptures, rightly understood, are at the heart our Christian faith, so much so that - with significant hyperbole - Wesley called himself **a man of one book**. In the preface to the first volume of his sermons, he wrote...*

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! ... Let me be a man of one book. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his Book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.

*Sermons on Several Occasions, Vol. 1 (1746),
Preface, §5, Works, 1:104-6.*

John Wesley was a scholar, educated at Oxford University. He owned hundreds of books, had read probably thousands more. He quoted texts besides the Bible. He translated, abbreviated, paraphrased, and re-published the works of many authors who he believed would be helpful for those Christians in his larger care, in the Methodist societies. But the scriptures were at the heart of his faith, and his preaching. (So also it has been for me). “A ‘man of one book’ — and a thousand books!” as Randy Maddox has put it in his extended essay.

*In Wesley, Wesleyans, and Reading Bible as Scripture, 3-18, 277-80.
Edited by Joel B. Green and David F. Watson.*

*Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012
[https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/
JW_A_Man_of_One_Book.pdf](https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/JW_A_Man_of_One_Book.pdf)*

After his experience at Aldersgate street, he began field preaching, at the urging of a friend named George Whitfield, another Anglican clergyman.

Whitfield was an evangelist, preaching both in the British Isles and in the colonies (from Massachusetts, to Georgia), and was a key figure (along with Jonathan Edwards) in what is sometimes called the first Great Awakening. (1720-1740)

Having taken up field preaching, Wesley began organizing those who responded into Methodist societies, and helping them to become deliberate in the development of their own spiritual lives.

Wesley saw the purpose of the societies to be “To reform the nation and, in particular, the Church; to spread scriptural holiness over the land”. It was not about membership recruitment, or trying to save an institution. It was creating a structure that would facilitate the work of the kingdom in his present day, and in his own land.

We know no more than that Philip the evangelist had met this high ranking official from Ethiopia, then (after baptizing him) left him to go his own way, while Philip went on to share the message of the resurrection with others who lived in or near the region we now think of as the Gaza Strip.

*In his “field preaching” Wesley met coal miners and dock workers, and organized them within their home communities to become people who would pursue holiness of heart and life, and to continue to spread the work of Methodism:
Holiness.*

This life change, (being made perfect in love was the language Wesley preferred), this holiness of heart and life can be found described in our passage from 1 John today. The author teaches that when we understand who God really is, we are changed. God has proven that God is love in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. Because God is love, we love.

Through Christ, we are given the gift of life, and we proclaim that he is the Son of God, the savior of the World. We seek to stay in relationship with God, through Christ, (a matter also presented in our Gospel), thus becoming empowered to live fruitful lives, lives of love. We share in the Spirit of Christ, and because we know who God really is (Love), having met God in Christ, we do not fear the day of judgment.

If our actions in life are rooted in fear of God, they are under duress, not free deeds of love. When we understand that God loves us, and has acted concretely, for us individually and personally not just in the abstract and in aggregate, sharing in the Spirit of Christ we become free to love in turn.

Holiness of heart and life, Christian perfection, is pictured for us here in 1 John as a life of loving freely because God has so loved us; this is the way Wesley usually talked about it.

Today, there are multiple groups that find at least part of their origin in the Methodist Societies that were begun by John and Charles Wesley. The United Methodist Church is the largest of those groups.

In other groups, there are other ways of preaching Christian holiness. I will share one of those other examples, though it is not my preferred approach. One way of understanding the work of God in us, by the Spirit, is that God deals with a fundamental problem that we have.

That problem is called “original sin”, an internal drive if you will, that is contrary to the will of God. John Wesley said that if anyone did not believe in original sin they were still a pagan. Original sin is part of our “articles of religion”, though we may not talk about it as much today.

For further reading: <https://holyjoys.org/sin-free-will-grace/>

But if we do have an internal drive that puts us at odds with God, then full salvation must mean that God works to deliver us from that internal evil.

Some preach that it may happen at a moment, just like assurance of salvation can come in a moment: a second definite work of grace, subsequent to regeneration, accomplished by the Holy Spirit, thereby purifying the heart from original sin and empowering for continuous growth in grace, victorious living and fruitful service.

Compare for example <https://wbs.edu/about/distinctives/>

Those who preach holiness in this way compare it to God removing or uprooting a weed, or eradicating an illness, and restoring us to the image of holiness in which Adam and Eve were first created. Some of those preachers might like to use the pruning image from the Gospel of John, as an image of God removing the dead wood that saps our strength, and limits our fruitfulness.

While this approach to Christian holiness may be useful to some, as it was to one of my seminary professors in particular (eg Dr. J. Kenneth Grider), rooted in the Gospel and letter of John, I have found the “theology of Love” approach, as preached by Wesley, and as expounded by another of my professors to be more useful (eg Dr. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop).

Dr. Grider said he would preach Christian Holiness in this way even if he found no scriptural foundation for it, because it was the way he had experienced it.

So what I hope you take with you today is this...

If our history/heritage is any indication, our future fruitfulness, as a congregation, and as a denomination, will be directly linked to our understanding that the grace of God is addressed to each of us, concretely, individually, as well as “as a community”.

Do you know, without a shadow of a doubt, that God is love and that God loves YOU? Do you understand that Christ was God’s gift of love to you in particular, as well as to all of us as Christians?

When we grasp this, with our heart as well as our heads, with God's spirit at work in us we too will experience freedom to love. For Wesley being made perfect in love meant, for him, sacrificing reputation and standing in order to share God's love in non-traditional ways.

It meant becoming innovative in organizing those who responded to the message. It meant helping them to become deliberate about remaining connected to the vine and seeking to be fruitful.

It also meant amicably working with others, even some with whom he had significant theological disagreements, like the Calvinist George Whitfield, and even the favorite of the American Holiness movement, John Fletcher.

Never mind how we always have done it! How might we become more innovative in sharing the love of God in our community? How can we now become the hands and feet that bring good news to the hurting? Are we willing to make love our priority, rather than prioritizing "right answers", and traditional ways of doing things?

Gracious God, you met John Wesley's uncertainty with divine assurance and you called him to declare your salvation in the fields, streets, and prisons where people were desperate for good news. Inspire us today to carry beyond the doors of this building the stories of all you have done among us, that we may grow as your church in the world, a living temple that brings your love and grace into all the corners of our communities, the places and people that most need your good news. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.