

The Wesleyan Way

A Five-Part Sermon Series

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*Active faith that lives within,
conquers hell and death and sin,
hallows whom it first made whole,
forms the Savior in the soul.
-- Charles Wesley, 1740*

Part 1: Filled with God's Love

Part 2: Liberating through God's Love

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The Wesleyan Way, Part 1: Filled with God's Love

September 13, 2026
Ordinary Time

Romans 8:1-4, 11, 14-17

Over the next month, I'll be sharing some of the enduring elements of Wesleyan spirituality. If you're new to United Methodism or to Bear Creek, I hope this will help orient you to our tradition. But even if you've been a lifelong Methodist, there's an opportunity here to reflect on your spiritual journey in light of a particular people's story. Methodism is not the *only* story, and it certainly hasn't been a *static* story, but it does continue to frame the Gospel in a way that many people around the world find grounding and compelling. I want to be clear that my intention in these sermons is not simply to present history. *Today is the day of salvation*, scripture says. *The word of God is living and active*. My prayer is that God would use this exploration of one spiritual path to us all deeper into grace, holiness, and love.

Let us pray: **May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.**

Wesleyan spirituality is named after John and Charles Wesley. They were two brothers, born in England at the dawn of the 18th century, who experienced the love of God so powerfully that they were inspired to organize a revival movement within their home tradition, the Church of England. Even though that national institution largely rejected their vision, the Wesley brothers' practice of faith was embraced by thousands of ordinary people in England and the American colonies. John was the theologian, pastor, and organizer of the movement. Charles was the poet and hymn writer. And because of their methodical approach to personal spiritual development, the people of the movement became known as Methodists.

Today's theme is **filled with God's love**. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that God has given us a spirit of adoption, a Holy Spirit that speaks to, and with, and sometimes even *for* our own spirits, steadying us in a divine love that we can trust. This assurance—that God is present to us and cares for us—is a great privilege of knowing Jesus. It formed the core of John's preaching and of Charles's hymn writing.

Listen to a few lines from the hymns of Charles Wesley.

"My soul is all an aching void,

Till thy Spirit here abides,

And I am filled with God."¹

...

"Send us the Spirit of thy Son,

To make the depths of Godhead known,

To make us share the life divine."²

...

"Plunged in the Godhead's deepest sea,

And lost in thy immensity."³

...

"Give me thyself, forever give."⁴

You and I and all creation have been created to share in God's own life, to be filled with God, to want more of God every day. Which is to say, we have been created to experience union with the Love who comes to be with us in Christ and who suffers with us, so that we can go be

¹Charles Wesley, "Wretched, and miserable," stanza 6.

²Charles Wesley, "Hymn 1," Whitsunday Hymns (1746), stanza 6.

³Charles Wesley, "Hymn to the Holy Ghost," Hymns and Sacred Poems (1739), stanza 4.

⁴Charles Wesley, "Hymn to the Holy Ghost," Hymns and Sacred Poems (1739), stanza 2.

with others in suffering love. *Never alone*. What John and Charles did was recover the heart of the Gospel for their own time and place, and they were able to effectively share God's love for every person, no matter their social status as educated or uneducated, wealthy or poor, man, woman, or child, incarcerated or free. Embodying God's free and all-embracing grace is what it means to walk the Wesleyan Way. Let's go back and see how this happened for them, so that we might be ready for it to happen for us.

As John Wesley was growing up in the town of Epworth one thing became increasingly clear to his young mind: he would become, like his father Samuel, an ordained priest in the Church of England. It might've been the daily examinations his mother Susanna put him and his eight siblings through, testing their Latin, Greek, and scripture memorization before meals, or her weekly spiritual interview with each child. It might've been watching Samuel go about his parish duties, preaching, teaching, counseling, and administering the Sacraments. Perhaps it was the fire that struck the family's home in 1709 when John was six years old, imprinting on him a sense of destiny; the fire had trapped him on the top floor, and he would have perished if not for a parishioner who, standing on another man's shoulders, hauled him out of the window at the last moment. John believed he was saved for a reason. Along with these particularities of circumstance, simply being upper-class, educated, and a preacher's kid in England in the 18th century meant the chances were good that you'd turn out to be a preacher yourself. All three of Samuel's sons—Samuel Jr., John, and Charles—became priests.

John Wesley was born and bred for the institutional Church of England, which in his time was a gentlemen's church: highbrow, trafficking in jargon, largely unconcerned with life beyond the parishes. Growing numbers of poor folk were moving into crowded, urban settings to work in the mines, mills, and factories cropping up in newly-industrialized England. The national church

felt very little accountability to the working poor. It was the kind of church that presumes possession of the Spirit, that seeks to domesticate the radical concern of the living God. John got an elite education, took on a modest professorship at Oxford, and was ordained a priest at the age of 25. His path could not have been more clearly laid before him.

Except for this: John's heart longed for *more*. He had the privileged upbringing. He could read the ancient languages of scripture and recite large swaths of the Bible by heart. He was at home with the rituals and proper theological answers of the institutional church. And he even had genuine pastoral gifts. But he was profoundly unhappy. His heart ached for something beyond knowledge and tradition, for an experience of something alive, something personal and real. That something, of course, was a *someone*. Wesley wanted *God*. Not just the *idea* of God, but God's immediacy, God's living presence within him. He felt that he was estranged from that inner witness of the Spirit about which Paul testifies in Romans 8.

So, John did what he had been trained to do at home and at school: he engaged in rigorous, disciplined practice. He held himself to a high standard of Christian living, and meticulously tracked his progress in moral perfection. He and his brother Charles started what they called the Holy Club at Oxford. The members of the Holy Club devoted themselves to the pursuit of holiness. They held each other accountable to a bracing regiment of prayer, fasting, and service. In his journal, John methodically logged each minute of the day, keeping an account of the degree to which every moment, action, and thought, was properly devoted to God.

This rigor did nothing to quench his spiritual thirst. It only amplified it. So, John pivoted. A totally new experience will do the trick! He took a path that many people from Europe were taking at that moment in history: a path across the Atlantic Ocean to the American colonies. At

the age of 32, Wesley landed in the brand-new settlement of Savannah, Georgia to serve as the local priest, where he felt he could participate in something new and important and useful.

But...*wherever you go, there you are*. The change of scene did not answer the longing in his soul, and his ministry in Savannah was doomed from the start. Ineffective among the native peoples, at odds with the colonists who preferred a less formal style of religion, and mired in a scandalous love triangle (a story for another time), John returned to England a broken man after just two years abroad.

His next move—and this, while not the answer itself, was a major step in breaking down his ego—was to seek spiritual counsel from leaders in a different tradition, the Moravian faith. Wesley had encountered a group of German Moravians during his sea voyage to Georgia. During a great storm, Wesley had been terrified for his life while the Moravians had remained calm, singing hymns and testifying to their unshakeable faith in God’s love and power. Their way of moving through the world made a real impression on him.

When Wesley got back to England, he sought out the Moravians and spent time living and praying among them. The story goes that he received this counsel from one of their leaders: “Preach faith until you have it; then when you have it, preach faith.” Wesley didn't have it, and he hadn’t had it for so long that he was doubting even his call to preach.

Let’s take stock of the story so far. Over the years, John had (1) tried to muscle his way to perfection; he had (2) tried healing his soul sickness in a different country; and he had (3) tried to reproduce somebody else’s faith in his own life. None of it had worked. That longing for a living relationship with God had become torturous to Wesley. It would not go away, and he did not have the power to satisfy it. Relying on his own resources and energies, vast as they were,

was not the answer. This was a hard-earned lesson. This *is* a hard-earned lesson for any of us who know the real thing is out there—is *in here*—and have struggled to make contact.

It is very fitting that what came next came “unwillingly” for Wesley, because he had already done everything he could to will his way into an assurance of God’s love. Here is the famous entry from his journal, dated May 24, 1738:

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.⁵

And an assurance was given me. Here it was: trust, peace, the strange warming of a cold heart. The Spirit of Christ, suddenly burning in John’s very being. It came as a gift. It came when striving gave way to surrender, when willfulness gave way to humility. In a season of weariness and failure and vulnerability, God’s grace broke through to him. In a moment of personal unwillingness, John learned that Love is always willing to draw near.

The strange warming of his heart changed everything for John. He realized that his great longing for God had all along been an echo of God’s longing for him. And once he stopped trying to micromanage the journey toward God, he was able to rest in God’s love. As Paul puts it in Ephesians, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourself, it is the gift of God” (2:8).

⁵William J. Abraham, *Methodism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.

We each have a longing deep within us. A wanting. A craving. The fourth-century bishop and theologian St Augustine famously opens his *Confessions* with these words of prayer: “[God,] you made us with yourself as our goal, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁶

At bottom, we ache for a love that will set us free. Free from fear. Free from our need to be in control, to have our way, to define ourselves and the boundaries of our belonging. We ache for a love that will set us free from stories that don’t serve us any longer, from existential boredom or despair, from socially prescribed expectations and our complicity in systemic violence. We may call this Love by different names: Spirit, Source, Creator, Father, Mother, Christ, Eternal Presence, Light, or something more. It’s not so important that we agree on how to name this Love; what’s most important is honoring the longing.

And I have to tell you, a church can’t satisfy that longing in you. A pastor can’t meet that need. Your education or politics or possessions won’t get to the root of it. None of us can get to God by trying to live a perfect life. It won’t work to take our old problems to new places. Neither can we know love for ourselves through the words and experiences of someone else, no matter how wise and good they are. It comes at the end of all that; it comes as gift, when we’ve released our grip on things enough to open our hands and wait, even if we wait in our spiritual poverty “very unwillingly.”

As John learned, the truth that God is with us and for us has to be known from the inside out. And it *can* be known: “Listen!” Jesus says in Revelation, “I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me” (3:20). God wants to pour the Holy Spirit into our hearts, gathering up all our restlessness and returning it to its source as we cry, “Abba, Father!”

⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Sarah Ruden (New York: Modern Library, 2018), 3.

Think of your life, which you did not give to yourself.

Think of the earth, which you have inherited.

Think of your breath, which moment by moment comes to you as a gift from your body.

Grace is like that. God is very near to you. And you can, in your own way and time, come to rest in that love which formed you in secret, and rests in your depths, and grounds and connects all things.

Our Wesleyan Way flows from a strangely warmed heart. John's experience of assurance allowed him to be vessel of God's purposes in the world. From that point forward, he was no longer fixated on the status of his own soul, meticulously tracking his own progress toward some faraway goal. The goal was never out there to get through stiving; it was in his heart, to receive through surrender and rest. He now preached and wrote and counseled and led and prayed out of that center.

It's not as though life got easier for him. He continued to navigate controversies with the national Church of England and with civil authorities. He worked tirelessly to address poverty and loneliness, and to end transatlantic slavery. By some estimates, he "road up to 20,000 miles a year on horseback. He preached 800 sermons a year to crowds as large as 20,00. In a typical day he was up at 4:00 a.m.; he preached at 5:00 a.m.; and he was on the road to the next assignment at 6:00 a.m." But this toil wasn't about him anymore. It was about helping as many people as possible to know themselves as God's beloved in a deeply interior way.

Perhaps you're a person who lives with a simple yet deep sense of God's immediacy; you know that you are loved and there's nothing you can do about it. Thanks be to God! Find ways to serve out of that center and bring others into an experience of their belovedness.

Perhaps you're a person still restless for your true home, your true source—and you're seeking, striving, perhaps running out of steam. Know that God is patient. God is kind. God is very near to you. Your longing is not a lie. Your hunger for living faith is not your enemy. It is God's own longing for you echoing in your spirit.

And should it come to it, God will wait for you to come to the end of your strength, like the Father in Jesus' parable, and will run to embrace you, God's Prodigal child, with unconditional grace that warms the heart.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Wesleyan Way, Part 2: Liberating Through God's Love

September 20, 2026
Ordinary Time

Luke 4:14-21

This was Jesus' first sermon. After being baptized by John in the Jordan river, Jesus had entered the Judean wilderness, enduring forty days of physical hunger and spiritual temptation. Emerging from that experience of initiation, he traveled north, back to his home region of Galilee. He was, Luke says, "in the power of the Spirit." He was ready to begin his ministry.

Jesus comes to Nazareth, the small town where he had been raised in obscurity. He goes to worship in the local synagogue, as was his custom. We might say he came back to his hometown church. He's asked to read and interpret on one of his people's sacred scriptures, the prophet Isaiah, for the edification of the congregation. And he brings into center focus a passage from Isaiah 61, in which the prophet proclaims what it means to be anointed by the Spirit.

"He found the place," Luke says. *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Lk 4:18-19a, CSB)*

Isaiah's prophetic words declare God's intention to help those who are hurting, liberate those who are in bondage, and establish just social relations between all people. On a communal level, Isaiah's words resonated with the Jewish people's experience of exile to Assyria & Babylon, and, in Jesus' time, to their status as occupied people under Roman rule. They had been harried by many nations, and often felt themselves to be the captives, the oppressed.

Yet a full reading of the prophets makes clear that the exile was, in part, a consequence of the community's failure, especially the failure of its religious leadership, to care for the most vulnerable. The final phrase of what Jesus' reads in the scroll—*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*—is a reference to the Jubilee year, a law prescribed in Leviticus 25. Every fiftieth year was to be a year of liberation for the whole Israelite community, including their land and animals and any non-Israelite neighbors living among them. Property was to be returned to its original caretakers; all debts were to be cancelled and all slaves or indentured servants set free. The land was to be allowed to rest from cultivation, and the people were commanded to eat only what grew wild and untended.

This tradition was grounded in the memory of God setting the Israelites free from their enslavement and forced labor in Egypt. If they had begun to act like other peoples through the consolidation of resources among powerful, through brutal labor expectations on the common person, through a commodified relationship to time and land, the Jubilee Year was meant to wipe the slate clean and remind this community that they were made to rely on God for their daily bread, that they had been created to care for the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the poor. Just as God had cared for them. Sadly, there is no evidence that the Israelites ever practiced the Jubilee Year.

Jesus chooses this charged reading knowing that it would touch the deep desire and the deep failure of his people. He chooses a reading about God's special concern for those who suffer because of failures of community care.

He reads, and sits, and all eyes are on him. And then Jesus preaches his first sermon.

"Today," he says. "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus brought the words of the prophet Isaiah into his present reality. He collapsed the distance between the word on the page and the people in the room with him. *All this*, he effectively says, *God's special concern for those who suffer, God's desire for a creation of mutual care, today it is happening.*

I have been anointed for this ministry, he tells his community. *We cannot keep living as though these words belong to the past or to the future; we cannot treat this vision as an artifact to be interested or entertained or inspired by. It is meant to be made real and present in the body—in my body and in your body, in all who come near and share in my Spirit.*

Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today. Not somewhere far away, but right here.

Declaring the present fulfillment of Isaiah's vision was both an indictment of all the oppressive social relationships to which his people had acquiesced, and it was an invitation for them to step into God's new reality. Jesus' hometown congregation responded by trying to throw Jesus off of a cliff, but that's a moment for us to explore at a later time.

This is part two in an exploration of the Wesley Way, our spiritual tradition as United Methodists. Last week, I talked about John Wesley's conversion, the strange warming of his heart. After many years of striving for perfection, Wesley received an assurance of God's love and unconditional acceptance for him in a moment of complete failure, weakness, and vulnerability

I'd like to suggest that that was John's *first* conversion experience, and today I want to share about the second, when Wesley learned to carry God's deep concern for every person's dignity into the spaces of agony in the real world, when he dedicated himself to being in genuine ministry with poor folk of eighteenth-century England.

After John experienced the strange warming of his heart during a religious gathering on Aldersgate Street in London, the direction of his life changed forever. What followed Aldersgate for Wesley was a time of searching for how to share the message of God's great love with as many people as possible. This would mean that he needed to be present with the people, meeting them where they gathered, and that his preaching would need to be accessible to them, spoken plainly, not like the highly polished treatises he had been trained to preach for the intellectual elite in the national church. It would also mean organizing people into networks of spiritual and economic care. This work transgressed the norms of the institutional church that had ordained Wesley and to which he had pledged himself.

England was the first of the modern European nations to industrialize. Around the country, mills, mines, and factories were being built, and many thousands of poor folks who needed work left behind the land and communities they had been a part of for generations to cluster in growing urban environments. Capitalism demands that all of reality be objectifiable, classifiable, and useful for turning a profit. Time, tradition, story—many of the things that add texture and depth to the human experience—get flattened when people are treated like cogs in a machine. These laborers were unprotected by the law and almost entirely excluded from the political process. They were working in dangerous new conditions. They were not seen as fully human by the churches or the ruling classes.

Wesley took the message of God's love directly to them. He embodied liberation among them. He came to a moment when he famously declared, "I look upon all the world as my parish." He went where the pain was, and he said, *Today, this is fulfilled in your hearing.*

But John Wesley hadn't always done that. No, he had to be invited. That's why I call it his second conversion. The first was inward, the second was social.

John first preached in the open air in 1739, when he was 36 years old. The famous revivalist preacher, George Whitefield, asked Wesley to come and substitute preach for him outside a factory. Though Wesley had recently been transformed by that personal encounter with God's love, the idea of preaching outside a church building made him uncomfortable. He was so torn that he reverted to a superstitious practice and cast lots to decide. The lots fell for him to go and preach among the unchurched poor.

In his journal, Wesley wrote, "I had been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church."

Let me say that again: "I had been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church."

Feel those words, *decency, order*. Feel how different they are in energy from the proclamation of Isaiah, which Jesus made his own, and which John was about to make his own: *good news, release, recovery, freedom—today!*

His journal continues: "At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining the city, to about three thousand people. The scripture on which I spoke was this... 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor...'⁷

This is really important. What Jesus did with Isaiah's vision, Wesley did it with Jesus' vision. He consented to it, gave it space to live in his body, made it a matter for *today*.

⁷William J. Abraham, *Methodism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 7

And it *required* something of him, a kind of humiliation. *I submitted to be more vile*. He became despicable in the eyes of national church. By joining the poor and poor in spirit in their reality, he took on something of their condition. That was the price, the cost, of also contributing love and hope and real help to them. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:10: “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.” This is what it means to be anointed with the Spirit of Christ who “made himself nothing” (Phil 2:7) to be with us. When John accepted that invitation from George Whitfield and stepped inside Jesus’ first sermon to make it his own, the Methodist Revival was born.

From that point forward, Wesley called people to join him on a way where personal holiness, which has to do with the purity of one’s heart, is joined to social holiness, which has to do with relationships of love and mutual service. For Wesley, personal and social holiness were two sides of the same coin; there couldn’t be any lasting social holiness without personal holiness, and personal holiness meant nothing if it was not expressed as social holiness. Of course, Wesley didn’t invent this idea. It’s as old as Moses: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Down through the centuries, people of God have named this dynamic as faith and works, prayer and action, contemplation as resistance.

John Wesley lived and pastored for about sixty more years after that initial experience of preaching to the working poor. During those decades, he and the growing number of Methodists sought to transform English society from the ground up. They supported fairer wages and protections for workers. They enlisted women alongside men as preachers and teachers. They established free medical centers and schools. They advocated for the end of the slave trade.

This is something I really value about our tradition, that it grew up in resistance to the ruthless aspects of capitalist society. The first piece of property owned by Methodists was a building in Moorfields, London called the Foundery. Originally, the Foundery was a factory that had produced brass cannon for the British army. When John purchased and repaired the facility in 1739, he transformed it from a place that had created weapons of war into a place that offered people comprehensive care. Methodists at the Foundery complex opened a free medical clinic, a free school for children, and free spaces for community gatherings and worship.

This is part of our tradition. And while Methodists haven't always honored it, and sometimes have done things in direct opposition to it, it endures, and is reflected in our theology and practice, in the denomination's *Social Principles*, in its moral witness in Washington DC and the United Nations. Social holiness is reflected in how we name Christ's Table as a place where all are welcome as equals, regardless of our sexualities and genders, our citizenship status or income, our criminal records or present failures

All Wesley did, and it's all any of us can ever do, was wake up to the reality of his own *today*. Every day is God's *today*. And the work that precedes a life of social holiness is the work of becoming present to the movements of Spirit in the life we are actually living.

Being present is difficult. It's always been difficult. We humans tend to get stuck in the past, regretting lost opportunities or longing for former vitality, or we get immobilized by the heaviness of the future. Today we have a false present available to us always through the internet. A kind of global, abstract present that numbs and scares us more than it energizes and grounds. An always-available everywhere, which strangely gives us nowhere to go.

Often, we need an invitation to remind us that today really is the day of salvation, an invitation to wake up and ask: What is giving me joy and what is breaking my heart about the

world as I experience it? Who am I being called to serve? Whose suffering am I not even seeing? Our tradition—both biblically and as Methodists—extends that invitation.

The issues are big: affordable housing, food insecurity, wealth distribution, the pollution of creation, war, and everything else. But the tasks set before us are always tasks of today: they are small, interpersonal, creative, daily tasks. They require presence. Will we make the visit, have the conversation, write the check, pray the prayer, sing the song, forgive the harm, contemplate the beauty, share the meal, love the child that Christ sets before us, *today*?

I want to close by bringing us back to Luke's Gospel. He uses the word *today* to punctuate critical moments of Jesus' story. On Christmas night, when the choir of angels appears above the shepherds in the fields, the angels declare: "For there is born to you *today*, in David's city, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11). When Jesus enters the city of Jericho, he looks up into the trees where Zacchaeus the tax collector is perched, separated from his community, watching him. "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house *today*" (19:5). As they visit together, Zacchaeus pledges to return any ill-gotten gains back to the people. And Jesus says, "*Today* salvation has come to this house" (19:9). And as he hangs on the cross between two other crucified criminals, Jesus extends mercy to the dying man beside him: "Truly I tell you, *today* you will be with me in paradise" (23:43).

Born for *you*. I must stay with *you*. *You* will be with me in Paradise. Fulfilled in *your* hearing. Shepherds and tax collectors, criminals and congregations. Every day is God's *today*. The invitation is always there for us to make *God's* today *our* today.

And when we live a life full of God's *today's*, we come to feel that we've been graced with eternity.

Thanks be to God: Amen.

The Wesleyan Way, Part 3: Knit Together in God's Love

September 27, 2026
Ordinary Time

Mark 3:31-35

At the beginning of the Bible, the book of Genesis opens with a theological poem about God's creation of the cosmos. The refrain of that poem is "And God saw that it was good." Light is separated from darkness, sky is separated from water, land is lifted out of the sea; the earth is populated with birds, animals, creeping things. And all along, punctuating the days of creation, God sees that each new addition, each new layer of complexity, is good, good—very good!

But there is one moment in this story when God seems dissatisfied, when something strikes God, in this world before sin, as *not* good. It comes after God has given life to the first human person: "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the [hu]man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner,'" Genesis 2:18. This '*not* good' stands out from all the declarations of goodness. God recognizes that human beings need relationship. We need each other.

When Christians interpret these stories, we see that our need for community comes from our having been created in God's image. If God is an eternal community of three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—then being made in the image of a communal God means we will also live communally. When we are isolated, we are estranged from the fullness of our humanity. So, God causes Adam to fall into a deep sleep, takes one of his ribs, and fashions Eve from it. God gives Adam and Eve to one another.

It is not good for any of us to be alone. We can't escape our need to know and be known, to love and be loved.

But life is fraught with pain and history is harsh. It is not easy for us to recognize our fundamental belonging with one another. From an early age, we learn why our people are here and those people are over there, why we are in the right and others are in the wrong. Our experience dims our hope for what relationships can offer us, and we pull away from others in order to be safe. God's people face head on, over and over again, the challenges that come from being made to live in relationship. The Bible is a mirror for our brokenness.

This brokenness begins with brothers—Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau—and grows to structure the nations: Hebrew & Egyptian, Northern Kingdom and Southern Kingdom, and, most fundamentally for God's people, Jew & Gentile. To be a Gentile was, by default, to be outside of the covenant, to be unchosen, unclean. By the time of the incarnation, there were many Pharisaical laws restricting any kind of neighborly fellowship between Jews and Gentiles: You couldn't sit at their tables, eat their foods, embrace them. Jesus joined us in this divided world and began the work of redeeming our likeness to God. He did this by dissolving divisions through his embodied love for all people.

Jesus' first disciples were Jews, as he was. After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Gentiles began responding with faith to the apostles' preaching about Jesus. Suddenly, the unclean ones, the outsiders, were *there*, joining people like Peter and Paul in sincere faith. They had fallen in love with Jesus, had experienced God's love for them.

Much of the New Testament in one way or another is grappling with the stunning gift of grace: *All* people have been set in right relationship with God through Jesus. So, if you are standing next to Jesus and I am standing next to Jesus, then we have to learn to be together in Jesus' presence.

Peter's way of imagining spiritual community was overturned as he stood in the ritually unclean home of Corneilus and witnessed the Holy Spirit fill this Gentile Roman soldier and his family with faith and love. "Then Peter began to speak: 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right... Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have'" (Acts 10:34, 47).

I now realize... Sometimes we have to be brought back to the basic truth that we are created for one another.

Jesus began redefining the meaning of family early on in his public ministry. Mark paints a picture of the initial popularity of Jesus' ministry. As Jesus travels throughout the region of Galilee, crowds from all over Israel come to hear him teach and to seek healing for themselves or their loved ones.

I alluded last week to the rejection Jesus faces from his hometown. Luke tells a dramatic story of a group of people turning from adoring congregation into angry mob and trying to run Jesus off a cliff. Mark's way of communicating the rejection is more subtle, but no less clear. People had begun to say, "He has gone out of his mind." And scribes from way down in Jerusalem had come to slander him as demon-possessed. Jesus was causing a stir; he was endangering himself and, potentially, his community. The goal was to exist quietly and not attract the attention of the Roman occupation. So, Mark tells us in verse 21 of chapter 3, "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him."

When Jesus' mother and brothers come to the place where he is teaching, they "stand outside." They send someone to go get Jesus. They are waiting to scold him, *shush* him, bring him home. Jesus turns this situation into a teaching moment: "Who are my mother and my

brothers?” he asks. “And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”

Jesus says that his family, in the highest sense, are those who gather around him to seek the will of God. Jesus is at the center. Around him are the twelve apostles, the other disciples, and the crowds, learning to be together, to become a community in Jesus’ presence. But outside, keeping themselves at a distance from what’s unfolding in the house, are Jesus “natural” relations. Jesus takes advantage of that staging to make a point. We are made for one another. If someone has joined us in seeking God’s will, they become kin. This is why we cannot say to anyone: “You do not belong in the Church. You’re the wrong kind of person.”

We’re in our third week of exploring our spiritual heritage as United Methodists, which began with John and Charles Wesley, who led the Methodist revival in eighteenth-century England. So far, we’ve learned about the Methodists’ emphasis on personal faith, knowing God’s love at deeply interior level, *and* the social force of their convictions as they sought justice for the working poor, for the uneducated, sick and incarcerated, for women and children and slaves. They preached a Gospel of both *personal* and *social* holiness. Today I want to emphasize John’s approach to Christian community, because it was his genius as an organizer that helped the Methodist movement to endure.

John Wesley’s great gift as an evangelist was the way that he organized people to continue growing in their faith after their initial conversion. There were other revival preachers in England at that time, but most of them would blow through town, win souls (I’m using their language), and then leave for the next place without giving the people any structure or guidance for what to do next.

Those who responded eagerly to the message of salvation easily slipped back into their old habits and patterns of belonging. For the working poor of industrialized England, this meant that an initially joyful response in being claimed as God's beloved was quickly subsumed again by the grueling and isolating demands of labor and the loneliness of just getting by, of being a cog in the machine.

By contrast, John Wesley *lingered* in the places where he preached. He stayed long enough to organize people into local fellowships called societies, and, within societies, he chose leaders to oversee small groups of about a dozen persons each, which he called classes. The purpose of the society meetings was for Methodists to come together for "fellowship, preaching, prayer, and hymn-singing. ...Members [also] agreed to follow three General Rules: avoid evil, do good, and employ the means of grace God gives for spiritual growth."⁸ Societies were basically a second weekly church service, because Methodists were still encouraged to attend Sunday worship at their local Anglican parish to receive Holy Communion. They were also hubs for organizing local service to the most vulnerable members of their communities.

Classes, those smaller groups, also met once a week "for spiritual conversation and guidance. Members spoke about their temptations, confessed their faults, shared their concerns, testified to the working of God in their lives, and...prayed for one another... Every Methodist was expected to attend class meetings."⁹ It's from the Wesleyan class meetings that we have received that question of spiritual friendship and direction still in use today: *How is it with your soul?* Imagine being asked that question every week, and having to answer it in the presence of others who love you and want you to be well.

It is not good for us to be alone. So we ask each other: *How is it with your soul?*

⁸Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart & Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 17.

⁹ Yrigoyen, Jr., *John Wesley*, 18.

After Wesley came to town, people had these three concentric circles of Christian community to participate in. The widest circle was membership in the Church of England, primarily for the purpose of receiving Communion. The next circle in was a more energetic gathering, focused on worship and service, in the Methodist society. Finally, once a week, each Methodist would meet in their class meeting and speak from the heart.

Wesley's system of organization depended on the development of local leaders, both men and women who were spiritually mature and had wisdom. Wesley's system of organization also emphasized the preciousness of every individual person who joined the movement. As one writer has put it: "Wesley had gathered this new underclass *where they were* and had gathered them into new social groups in which each person found acceptance and a new sense of dignity" (17, emphasis mine). It was as if, by placing everyone in a society and a class, Wesley was saying, *You are worth knowing. Your story matters. The deep things you carry in your heart matter. You are wanting to know and do God's will in a realer way than before, so you are now on the journey together. You belong to each other.* And people responded to this. They were Somebodies, not through conformity but through spiritual community: through confession and forgiveness, shared joys and griefs, and service to their communities.

It is not good for us to be alone.

This Sunday marks three months for me as your pastor. And one thing I want to reflect back to you is that I see many ways that y'all are practicing genuine spiritual community with one another. The first time I visited with the men's group here, I was moved by how readily the men present spoke from their hearts about what was important to them and where they sensed God was working in their lives at the time. I've witnessed this same vulnerability at Women at

the Well, in the small group get-to-know-you sessions, and in our committee meetings. I even popped in on choir practice this week and found the same atmosphere of joy there!

Many of you are in covenant groups or spiritual friendships that stretch beyond the bounds of our particular congregation. And, to the point about lay leadership being a feature of the Wesleyan Way, I have felt very blessed by the commitment, wisdom, and expertise of the leadership here. Y'all have held *me*, made space for me to find my footing. I'm really grateful for all of that.

Of course, there are always ways to deepen our practice. We are putting our heads together about how to best care for our children, youth, and young families. We need to always be intentional about those among us who navigating grief or who are no longer able to attend church regularly or at all because of a change in living situation or physical ability. Plus, I've started signaling my own desire to get to know the church's neighborhood more, for Bear Creek to feel embedded in and a part of our immediate surroundings. But it makes me glad to know that y'all are willing and able to have these conversations. There is a lot of good work ahead of us.

All I want to do here at the end is to challenge us to remember the heart of the matter: 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

We are in spiritual community insofar as we are concerned about the welfare of each other's souls, and insofar as we are helping one another pay attention to the movement of God's Spirit in our lives.

We are called to receive as spiritual family whoever draws near to Jesus alongside us, not just the people we would more naturally affiliate with because of our life stage or interests.

And our practice of community must be, above all, dignifying, making us Somebodies to one another, just as we are all always already Somebodies to God. It's radical work to take responsibility for the quality of our presence with and toward one another.

May we continue to honor our fundamental need for community. May we make space for soul-encounters with our siblings in Christ. May we have eyes to notice who is drifting toward the edges so that we can reach out in love and assurance before bitterness has time to grow in that crack of separation. May we have boldness to ask for help, for the prayers and presence of our siblings. And may we be curious about the strangers we will somebody receive or be received by as family, though we might never have expected to belong together.

In Ephesians, Paul writes, "God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure." May it be our great pleasure, too, to receive the gift of being knit together in the love of God. Amen.

The Wesleyan Way, Part 4: Singing God's Love

October 4, 2026
Ordinary Time

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Many of you now know my two kids, Loren and Adrienne. They are 5 and almost 4. For a long time, they've had this goofy bedtime habit of asking me or Sus for a story and then, after the story is finished, asking for what they call "the song of the story." Adrienne in particular is demanding about all of this. First the story must be "out of your head" or "from your mind," meaning no book reading. It has to be original and include all her favorite things, which she lists, every night, in a huff: *princesses, bad guys, mermaids, treasure, superheroes...* (Yes, Sis, how could I have forgotten?) And then comes "the song of the story."

I'm not sure how this got started, but basically what the kids want is for us to take the story we just told them and *retell* it in singsong form. I usually just pick an old hymn melody and condense as much plot as I can without getting caught. No doubt, this is a tactic the kids use to delay going to sleep, and yet I have to admit that there's a wisdom in it. You see, for as long as there have been people telling stories, there have been people singing songs, often singing or poetically performing the stories as the primary means of telling them.

We teach our children their letters, colors, days of the week, months of the year, and animals through song. In college, I memorized the ancient Greek and Hebrew alphabets and many of the noun inflections and verbal conjugations by setting them to music. The hymns and praise songs we sing in worship often embed theology and biblical narrative in us more effectively than sermons do. Not always the best theology, it should be said; nevertheless, if you sing it you tend to remember it.

God's good news is meant to be sung.

When God's grace touches peoples' lives, they sing about it. This has been true from the beginning. We can't help ourselves. Song records the story. Song stirs the heart, gets our feet moving into a new day. Song binds the community together as one.

Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea (Exodus 15:21). On the shores of the Red Sea, with tambourine in hand, this is how Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, gave glory to the God who had freed her people from their enslavement in Egypt. She led the women in a procession and a song, and her words are one the most ancient fragments of sacred scripture that we have. *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior*, sang the unwed teenage Mary when Elizabeth affirmed the work of God in her, named the presence of God in her womb. And after Mary gave birth to Jesus, an angelic army filled the skies over the fields of Bethlehem with a song: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests*.

God's good news is meant to be sung.

If we were to survey all the songs drawn from the human heart by the love and power of God and recorded in sacred scripture, we would have to add to Miriam and Mary's songs the song of Deborah, the Hebrew judge, who praised Ja'el for driving a tent-peg through the skull of Sisera. There is the theological poetry of the Philippian hymn, which tells of Christ's self-emptying to the point of death and his glorification as the name above every name. We hear the Johannine prologue ("the Word was with God, and the Word was God"), and the ecstasies of Revelation—angels, martyrs, saints, and strange beasts exalting the lamb seated on the throne of heaven. We couldn't leave out Zechariah's *Benedictus* or Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* or those hymns which shook the very foundations of Paul and Timothy's prison cell in Philippi.

I'll say it again: the good news of God is meant to be sung.

There are the Psalms, chanted by Jews and Christians for thousands of years. There are the Eucharistic liturgies, the Gregorian chants, and the compositions of Bach, Beethoven, and Handel. Taizé choruses, sacred drumming, agonized laments. And just as there are rests in every piece of music, just as music is born out of and returns to silence, so even our moments of quiet contemplation have their place in humankind's great love song to God.

There are the African American spirituals, those freedom songs by which the Nobodies of the world re-membered their Somebodiness in the eyes of God. The spiritual was an entirely new art form, a way for African peoples, shorn of the particularities of their native cultures and languages, reconstituted themselves as a people. More than an art form, it was the power of resistance. Spirituals communicated secret messages of freedom. They took the biblical language of the white master class and restored it to its true purpose of liberation:

When Israel was in Egypt's land, Let my people go;

Oppressed so hard they could not stand, Let my people go;

Go down Moses, 'way down in Egypt's land;

Tell ole Pharaoh: Let my people go.

Men, women, and children sang and swayed together in secret meetings after long days of labor. They called upon—we might even say they called forth, made present in their communion—a God who cared for them, who shared their suffering, and who would not rest until liberation had come. The Civil Rights movement took up this tradition and sang, *We shall overcome someday*.

Even in our darkest hours and deepest needs, the people of God sing.

Not much is known about the Hebrew prophet Zephaniah. The Bible locates his prophetic ministry during the reign of King Josiah of Judah in the 7th century before Christ. Zephaniah's three chapters of doom end with this eruption of joyful song. They seem to fit the religious renewal and political reforms accomplished by Josiah when he came of age. Yet some scholars think these prophecies reflect, instead, Israel's painful exile in Babylon, and the joy of their return. Others doubt Zephaniah ever existed at all.

What matters to me is not historical exactitude but Zephaniah's response to the action of God on his community's behalf—even if that movement was yet to come, experienced now only as a promise. *Sing aloud, O daughter Zion,*” he urges. *“Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! (3:14).* In a single verse we have four imperatives—sing, shout, rejoice, exult—all saying the same thing: that song has a special place in our faith journey. Through song, we bring into the present moment our hopes for the future. Through harmony and shared movement, we become, momentarily, that beloved community for which we long. Singing is also a way to bear witness to the God who has removed our fear and our shame, who has gathered in the outcasts and saved those who could not save themselves. It's “the song of the story.”

Then, in verse 17 of Zephaniah chapter 3, something unexpected happens. Zephaniah's message shifts from what *we* do in response to *God* to what *God* does in response to *us*. The prophet says, *[God] will rejoice over you with gladness; [God] will renew you in [God's] love; [God] will exult over you with loud singing!* And then the speech even shifts into the first person, and we hear a stanza of God's own love song for us: *On that day I will gather you together / and bring you home again (v. 20).*

God singing about us? To us? Over us?

What a mystery, that we would bring such joy to our Creator!

And yet this is the good news of our faith, that through God's faithfulness to the covenant, and through Christ's death and resurrection, we have been made children of God, and who doesn't love singing lullabies, happy birthdays, and loves songs to their children? Perhaps *all* our songs of praise are echoes of, or small distillations of, God's eternal love song for the creation. Perhaps when we sing God's good news we are participating in God's song that is always already flowing through us and around us.

Over my head, I hear music in the air,

Over my head, I hear music in the air,

Over my head, I hear music in the air,

There must be a God somewhere!

During the same historical moment as the African American spirituals but in a very different context, eighteenth-century industrial England, John Wesley was instructing the early Methodists to sing. These men and women were mostly common laborers, and they were being ground down by the factories, the mines, the mills—by urban poverty. John believed that, by singing, the people would remember their dignity as human beings, and would feel themselves connected to God and to one another. Your voice might start off timid or tired, but it will soon be elevated.

Over the past few weeks, we've seen how the Wesleyan revival among the first Methodists had staying power because of its emphasis on God's love for the individual, its commitment to social action on behalf of the poor, and the way John Wesley organized its members into communities of care. But another huge factor in Methodism's power to reach people was the hymn-writing of John's brother, Charles Wesley. Like John, Charles was an

ordained priest in the Church of England. Shortly before John had his Aldersgate experience (remember his heart “strangely warmed”?) and received an inner assurance of God’s grace, Charles had had a similar experience. The two were spiritually in synch.

Charles understood the formative power of song. People can be spiritually educated through music. But songs don’t only help us *remember*. They also become something like prayers living inside us; they attach themselves to memories and longings and convictions. They remind us of who we are and where we’ve come from. They orient us. Charles wrote hymns that spoke of God’s deeply personal love, God’s immediate forgiveness and mercy, and God’s presence in the worshipping and serving community. Though some might seem old fashioned or too theologically rigid to us today, for his time and place, the hymns were radical. And Charles wrote over 6,500 of them. Hymns like: “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” and “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus,” “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” and “Christ the Lord is Risen Today. Alleluia!” And one of my favorites, though lesser known: “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.”

God is the source of all beauty, grounding our every encounter with beauty. We are made in God’s image, and this must mean that we are made to name, protect, and create beautiful things, beautiful lives, beautiful communities. Wherever the Spirit of God is at work in the world, you will find people invested in beauty. You will find those engaged with beauty through the work of restoration—mending what is broken, reconciling what is hostile and estranged. And you will find those engaged with beauty through creativity, making, among other things, poems, pottery, gardens, paintings, and, unfailingly, music.

There is no single formula to beauty, art, and song. Often the imposition of a formula can get in the way. It is good to take the songs of scripture and set them to melody—power will always linger there. It is good to sing the African American spirituals—to really sing them, with

proper feeling, as a part of a community of resistance. And it is good to sing some songs by Charles Wesley: they orient us to our tradition.

But the *pattern* across time is what's most important: The pattern of communities that have been touched by the Spirit of God bringing beauty into the world in a way that enriches and dignifies life here and now. As the scripture says, that we must “sing to the Lord a *new* song” (Psalm 96:1).

The next time you have a hymnbook open, turn to the very beginning and take a look at John Wesley’s “Directions for Singing,” published in an early Methodist hymnbook in 1761. Among his instructions for how and why we sing, he says this:

“See that you join with the congregation [to sing] as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up and you will find a blessing... Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength... Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing.”

The good news of God is meant to be sung.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Wesleyan Way, Part 5: Made Perfect in God's Love

October 11, 2026
Ordinary Time

Philippians 2:12-13; 3:10-12

The Old Testament book of Numbers tells a story about the Israelites drawing near to the Promised Land of Canaan after being released from slavery in Egypt and met by God on Mount Sinai. There at the boundary of their long-awaited home, Moses sends twelve spies, one man from each of Israel's tribes, into Canaan. He instructs them to bring back news about the population, fortification, and fertility of the land. Had God brought them to a good place?

After forty days, the spies return, and even though they have brought with them samples of delicious fruit—grape clusters and pomegranates and figs—ten of the twelve also return afraid. They announce that the land cannot be entered and occupied because the people who live there are “strong, and the cities are fortified and very large” (Num 13:28). They say, “[We] seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them” (13:33).

On that fateful day, their spirit of fear was decisive. Upon hearing this report, the Israelites rebel against Moses' leadership. They accuse God of bringing them to Canaan only to let them die. They pine for Egypt.

Angered by their loss of faith, God declares that none of the Israelites in that generation will enter the land of Canaan. The people will have to wander in the wilderness for forty years until a new generation has grown up and taken the place of the first.

Only Caleb and Joshua, the two spies who did not lose heart when they saw the peoples of the land, are exempted from this judgement. They alone will be allowed, forty years later, to enter the place of promise.

Years ago, when I was studying this story, I came across a Jewish midrash that moved me. Midrash is a way that Jewish readers interpret scripture imaginatively. Midrash takes the words on the page as a foundation and then fleshes out the story based on what the biblical writers have omitted. It's a playful and illuminating way of reading between the lines and filling in the gaps, answering questions like: *Then* what happened? What *was* that character thinking?

One ancient Rabbi puts forward an imagined divine response to the Israelite spies saying that they felt like grasshoppers standing before giants in Canaan. God says to them, "I take no objection to your saying: *we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves* but I take offense when you say *so we must have looked to them*. How do you know how I made you look to them? Perhaps you appeared to them as angels."¹⁰

This interpretation puts a fine point on where the Israelite leaders went wrong. They had this picture in their heads—grasshoppers standing before giants—and they thought it was the wrong picture to have. It should have been reversed, right? If God was really on their side, they should have been the giants, strong and unmovable. Instead, they felt so small, so insignificant.

From a biblical point of view, this is always the fundamental situation for God's people: grasshoppers standing before giants. God creates us to live lives of abundant love, *we* who are finite, vulnerable, clumsy humans. And we *draw the wrong conclusion* about our littleness. We decide that our smallness is an obstacle to God, when it is the perfect condition for God to act.

The Israelites rejected their fundamental situation when they ought to have embraced it. They had *always* been grasshoppers standing before giants, and that had never kept God from toppling kingdoms and splitting seas and raining bread down from heaven for them. How could the people know that they were not perceived, even in their frailty, as angels?

¹⁰ Quoted in *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, ed. Jacob Milgrom (Philadelphia & New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 107.

Far into the future, as he reflects on the death of Jesus, a worldly failure that nevertheless reconciled the world to God, Paul concludes that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness.

Always this: grasshoppers before giants.

Yes, but also, maybe, *angels*.

Whenever a Methodist elder or deacon is about to be ordained, they stand before those gathered at the annual conference session and answer a series of questions from their bishop. These nineteen questions are known as the "historic questions" because they date back to John Wesley himself, the Anglican priest who launched and led the Methodist revival in eighteenth century England. Wesley first posed the questions to his ordinands in 1773, and every one of us since then has had to answer them. I answered them before Bishop Bridgeforth and the Oregon-Idaho Conference members this past June.

A couple of the questions have to do with pastoral care. For example, "Will you visit from house to house?" Some ask about your lifestyle: "Are you determined to employ all your time in the work of God? Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work?" There is a question about scriptural authority and a few about supporting the institutional life of Methodism. But I want to spotlight the first four:

1. Have you faith in Christ?
2. Are you going on to perfection?
3. Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?
4. Are you earnestly striving after it?

And the ordinand's answer to each of these must be *Yes*.

Faith in Christ. Okay, that seems like an obvious requirement for Christians, not least for pastors. Especially when faith is understood as trust and reliance on grace, rather than as a kind of certainty. But what's up with these three questions about 'perfection': going on to perfection, expecting to be made perfect in love in this life, and striving after such a thing?

If you're thinking that perfection is an idea that can really hurt people in the church, you're absolutely right. When churches pressure people to present the appearance of a perfect life or faith or family, they do a lot of damage. If church is about constantly measuring and monitoring ourselves and others, it sucks the joy out of our fellowship.

Perfection as a kind of pristine spotlessness has to do with performance, legalism, and conformity, and these unforgiving, airless spaces are what Jesus cracked open during his own ministry. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, received the worship of outcasts, allowed supposedly 'unclean' people to touch him, and died among criminals. "*While we were yet sinners,*" scripture says, "Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Mercy is at the heart of the gospel. Our imperfections don't disqualify us from grace; instead, they make us *perfect* candidates for it.

Even so, John Wesley once said in a sermon that Christian perfection is "the glorious privilege of every Christian."¹¹ For Wesley, being made perfect...in *love*...in *this* life...is a hope and an *expectation* not just for clergy, but for *all* of us.

So what did he mean?

Wesley didn't invent the concept of "Christian perfection." He inherited it from the Bible and from the Christian spiritual tradition. Christian perfection is the idea that a person who trusts in Jesus and receives his spirit, which is the Holy Spirit, can think and act and love the way that Jesus thinks and acts and loves. Which is to say, *perfectly*.

¹¹Sermon 40, "Christian Perfection" (1741), §21, *Sermons* (Outler), p. 81.

The Holy Spirit is God, and God is Love. If God dwells in us, then our love for ourselves and others and all creation should, over time, become more and more like God's. If God's Love is boundless and unwavering, then why would any of us impose limitations on what God can do in us and through us? We all can learn to forgive ourselves, to bless our enemies, to share life with the poor and poor in spirit build just and generous community.

Another phrase that Wesley used a lot which is interchangeable with Christian perfection is "entire sanctification." To *sanctify* something means making it holy, setting it apart as devoted to God. Sanctification is the process of yielding all that we are to the love and service of God. Sanctification includes integrating our failures, regrets, and pain into our story so that they become sources of compassion and humility rather shame or fear. *Entire* sanctification means that this yielding and integration are complete. No conscious thought, desire, or act deviates intentionally from love.

Beautiful, right? But seems like a tall order. *Grasshopper, remember?*

The standard Greek word used in the New Testament to convey the idea of "perfection" is the word *teleios*, which comes from *telos*, meaning goal, end, or fulfillment. *Teleios* describes something or someone that has fulfilled its purpose, or come to maturity.

Perfection understood as *teleios* is about ripening. It's about orienting ourselves toward God and giving all that we have and all that we are to the journey into God. Christian perfection isn't static. It's not bland conformity to a belief system or a set of behaviors. It's not white-knuckling it so that we can be seen as worthy. It's not about hiding our pain. Instead, we "put on Christ," to use a New Testament phrase, and grow patiently and devotedly into his likeness.

Are you *going on* to perfection? *Do you expect* to be made perfect in love in this life? Are you *earnestly striving* after it?

These questions suggest a lifelong intention, movement, and desire. John Wesley really believed that anything was possible with God, and that, through God, a human life could become perfectly Christlike.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). It’s *teleios* there. “Be *teleios*, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is *teleios*.” Fulfill your purpose, which is love, as your Heavenly Father, who *is* Love, eternally fulfills His purpose. Even Jesus was just riffing on what God spoke to Moses. Leviticus 19:2: “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’”

Someone who has ripened into love still stubs her toe, still accidentally says the wrong thing at the wrong time, still gets the flu or overdraws her checking account, still has to ask others for help, still grieves. But everything has become an opening for grace, an opportunity for humility, forgiveness, and compassion. It’s up to God to take a grasshopper and show forth an angel. Paul emphasizes God’s initiative to the Philippians, “God is working in you, *giving* you the desire and the power to do what pleases him” (2:13).

Paul goes on: “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

“Becoming like Christ” is what we are “taken hold of” for, and it is something we, over the course of a life, press on to take hold of for ourselves.

The first part of what Paul says is key to the process. Knowing Christ. Knowing his power *through* participating in his sufferings. Knowing his resurrection *by* knowing his death.

The way of Christian perfection is actually the highest affirmation of our imperfections. The way of Christian perfection is a downward way, bringing us closer to the ground, closer to others, closer to the heart, just as Jesus drew near to us in our weakness and our need, and from that lowly place revealed the fullness of God's love for us. To trust God in our valleys of shadow and death, *that's* where our ripening into love draws its true strength.

The New Testament book of James says, "Consider it pure joy whenever you fall among various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete (*teleios!*), not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

This is a hard but good word. Life is hard and life has to do its work on us. The breakthroughs come when we have weathered life without losing touch with our longing for God. And if we lack the wisdom to do this, all we have to do is ask God, who is generous and kind, and will give it.

Remember the miserable, younger John Wesley who we met in the first sermon four weeks ago? Remember how he meticulously tracked every moment of his life in a journal to measure his progress on the way to moral perfection?

That man became the elder Wesley, who was happy and content, who received every day as a gift from God and only wanted to do the next right thing that God set before him to do. He had made peace with himself, because he no longer was running the calculation—*grasshopper before giant*—but resting in the God whose power is made perfect in weakness.

Do *you*, friends, expect to be made perfect in love in this life? Are *you* earnestly striving after it? Love is your Promised Land. It is your inheritance. Do not be afraid.

The song we are about to sing¹² begins with the words, “When morning dawns, and day awakes / to you I bring my need.” This is what we do as a Church. We support one another in our seasons of weariness and pain and heartbreak. We bear one another’s burdens. We hold one another in the light of God. We endure all things. We hold the dream for one another, the dream of coming home to the promised land of ripened love.

What matters for this work is not the proportion we see in our heads between ourselves and the journey but the *promise* that God has made to be with us every step of the way.

May we press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus first took hold of us.

Amen.

¹² “A Christian’s Daily Prayer” by Sovereign Grace Music.