

## A Heart Strangely Warmed

TEXT: Romans 3:9-31

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on June 30, 2024*

A number of years ago I visited Savannah, Georgia. There, in a lovely city park, was a statue of John Wesley. Why is there a statue of John Wesley in Savannah? I'm glad you asked.

In looking over Wesley's life and the Methodist movement he and his brother Charles started, we skipped right over two early life experiences that changed and shaped the newly-ordained John Wesley.

Rev. Samuel Wesley, the father of John and Charles, was not popular in his parish; but that didn't mean he wasn't well-connected or didn't have friends. One of Samuel's friends was James Oglethorpe, who founded the British Colony of Georgia in 1732. The settlement in Savannah was established a year later, which meant it was time to set up a church for the royal crown. And if you're going to have a church, you need a minister, and since Oglethorpe knew both Samuel and John, he invited John and Charles to come to Savannah.

The brothers got on a boat in October of 1735 for the four-month sail. Two important things happened on that trip. The first was that John got to know a Moravian bishop and twenty-six other Moravians who were making the same voyage. Otherwise known as the "Unity of the Brethren," the Moravians began as German-speaking Protestants, predating Martin Luther by a century in what's now the Czech Republic.

By the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, only a remnant was left, living together as an intentional community in the German town of Herrnhut. In 1727 they experienced a revival, begun by a communal outpouring of the Holy Spirit not unlike the original Pentecost, except instead of speaking in other tongues, the Unity of the Brethren, "learned to love one another."

In the wake of that experience, the Brethren set up a watch of continuous prayer that ran uninterrupted, 24 hours a day, for...100 years! They established a daily devotional as well as more than 30 international settlements that emphasized prayer and worship, a simple lifestyle, while also being generous with wealth, and a small group structure to help each other attain sanctification.

They were also the first Protestant missionaries, which is why John and Charles found them on a boat to Georgia. Just from that description and what you've learned over the past two months about John Wesley's view of holiness of heart and life, you can see why Wesley was immediately attracted to them as he engaged with them on the journey to Georgia.

But there was also a moment, when a violent storm arose at sea, Wesley took note that the only ones on the ship who seemed unafraid were the Moravians. Wesley noted in his journal,

"In the midst of the Psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main-sail in pieces, covered the ship and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Was you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied, mildly, "No; our women and children are not afraid to die."

John Wesley was already ordained and enroute to his first job as an Anglican priest. He had already been part of the Holy Club at Oxford and had already adopted his attitude toward earning, saving, and giving that had come from encountering the chambermaid who had no coat in winter.

He was living the Christian life and law as best he knew it. But the calm of the Moravians, in a storm that had the English screaming for fear of their lives, was a level of faith that John Wesley did not have within himself. For the rest of his life he would continue to seek out the wisdom of the Moravian Brethren, and he would return to this moment during his own crisis a few years down the road.

The other important event on that trip was when a mother engaged John, then 33 years old, to teach French to her eighteen-year-old daughter, Sophia, as they traveled. By the time they landed in Georgia in February of 1736, John and Sophy had a relationship that both expected would end in marriage.

While John's plan was to evangelize the Native Americans in the area, John ended up spending most of his time as the pastor of Christ Church in Savannah and Charles became Oglethorpe's "Secretary for Indian Affairs," which included

the chaplaincy at Fort Frederica. It took Charles, the founder of Oxford's Holy Club, only six months to recognize and stand up to Oglethorpe's misconduct with women, and Charles gave up on Georgia and headed back to England.

In the meantime, John continued to meet with Sophy for breakfast and French lessons while also deepening his relationship with the Moravian community, especially with their local bishop, August Gottlieb Spangenberg. When John felt it was time to make a marriage proposal to Sophy, he went to Bishop Spangenberg for his advice. The good bishop advised Wesley to avoid the affection of women as it might interfere with his calling and harm his ministry.

Wesley listened to the advice in his head rather than the advice of his heart and abruptly stopped seeing Sophy, without telling her why, and things went downhill quickly from there. Believing John no longer loved her, Sophy married William Williamson, a clerk in her uncle's store. Sophy's new husband then forbid her to have anything to do with John, including attending church.

She did go back to church after a time away, but when she came back, Wesley refused to give her communion. That enraged Sophy's new husband who went to his boss, her uncle, who also happened to be the Chief Magistrate for Savannah, and got a warrant against John Wesley. The charge was that Wesley had defamed Sophy by refusing her communion in a public congregation without due cause.

There was already no love lost between Wesley and the Chief Magistrate, who had been making life difficult for Wesley's Moravian friends, and although the judgment against him ended in a mistrial, John Wesley's reputation was ruined and on December 22, 1737, he fled the colony in secret and went back to England. His first official assignment as a parish priest had ended in disgrace after a mere two years.

Needless to say, John Wesley was not a happy man when he returned to England. He wrote in his journal, "I who went to America to convert others was never myself converted to God." He returned to Oxford to see Charles, who was recovering from pleurisy, and there met a newly ordained Moravian priest named Peter Böhler.

On March 4, 1738, John records in his journal, "Immediately it struck into my mind, 'Leave off preaching. How can you preach to others, who have not faith yourself?' I asked Böhler, whether he thought I should leave it off or not. He answered, 'By no means.' I asked, 'But what can I preach?' He said, 'Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.'"

Wesley reports that he did just that, adding that he did so "with strange indifference, dullness, and coldness, and unusually frequent relapses into sin" until May 24. From a Scripture he read at 5 am that morning to an afternoon church service at St. Paul's, familiar texts were developing a different ring to them. Still, however, he writes that he went "very unwillingly" to a society in Aldersgate-Street that evening, where a person was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

I don't know if Wesley was already familiar with Martin Luther's biography or, specifically, his Preface to Romans. Luther's Reformation and that Bible commentary predated John Wesley by 200 years, but the men had much in common. Both were scholars, both were priests, both had brushes with death that gave them a special sense of calling, and both found themselves trying to live up to a standard of holiness that they simply could not achieve.

Luther was constantly going to confession and so harried his confessor with the tiniest bits of sinful behavior that his superior finally had enough and gave Christian history one of the best quotes of all time. "Look here, Brother Martin, if you're going to confess so much, why don't you go do something worth confessing? Kill your mother or father! Commit adultery! Stop coming in here with such flummery and fake sins!"

But Luther's literal "come to Jesus moment" came as he was reading the initial chapters of the book of Romans, culminating in the passage Joyce read earlier from chapter three. The realization that there was nothing Luther could do to earn his salvation—that it wasn't about following the letter of the law but was a gift, given by the grace of God, bowled him over.

And, in response, Luther took both a literal and a metaphorical hammer and nailed a list of 95 things that the Catholic Church was doing wrong onto the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, the night before All Saints Day when everyone was required by Catholic law to go enter through those very doors for that Holy Feast Day.

And, digging deeper, Luther came to that discovery because St. Paul, who wrote the letter to the Romans almost 1500 years before Luther, had that same zeal for perfection in God's work that drove both Luther and Wesley.

And Paul is the first we know of in the Bible who became a follower of Jesus after recognizing that he couldn't earn his salvation either—in fact, it wasn't a thing that could be earned. It was only a thing that could be given in love by a God of grace. The law wasn't unimportant, which the rest of Romans makes clear, but keeping it wasn't what saved you. Keeping the law of Moses as best you could was not a *requirement*, but a *response* to salvation that was freely given by a loving God.

If you made a Venn diagram of the personality profiles of Paul, Luther, and Wesley, there would be considerable overlap, and each man was saved from a tormented inner life by the revelation Paul expressed in Romans 3:21-24:

“But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

So, there sat Wesley in a meeting on Aldersgate-Street, listening to Luther describe how Paul's letter to the Romans changed his life. Wesley's journal entry for May 24, 1738 says,

“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.”

The next few days were a whirlwind, after which Wesley went straight to Germany to spend three months learning from his Moravian friends about living and preaching a faith that allowed them to face death at sea unafraid; a faith that warms the heart; a faith that is revived and renewed, not by the strict keeping of laws, but by learning to love your neighbor.

While Wesley had theological differences with the Moravians, a warm-hearted faith allowed them to transcend intellectual differences and share a common bond. That bond between Methodists and the United Brethren continued throughout the centuries.

The Methodist Church in the United States was begun at what is now known as The Christmas Conference, which convened in Delaware on Christmas Eve in 1784. A few weeks prior, after unsuccessfully trying to get the Church of England to ordain clergy for America, John Wesley put aside the prohibitions of his church—to which he still belonged—and ordained Thomas Coke and sent him to convene the Christmas Conference to ordain more for service in the United States.

At the 1784 Christmas Conference, Coke ordained Francis Asbury and consecrated him as a general superintendent (aka bishop) for the new Methodist Church in America. Participating in Francis Asbury's ordination was Philip Otterbein, the German-born co-founder of the United Brethren in Christ.

In 1968, The Evangelical United Brethren, a German branch of the Moravian church in the United States, joined with The Methodist Church at the General Conference in Dallas to form the United Methodist Church. It's notable that the Moravians have historically been known for their great tradition of hymn singing.

Coming from two significantly different strands of the Protestant Reformation, the thing that brought Methodists and Moravians together—warm hearts that put love at the center of faith and practice, combined with singing together and bolstering each other in a system of small-group discipleship—was able to overcome theological differences that have fractured Christians both before and since.

Methodism didn't spread like wildfire in the UK and United States because of a carefully crafted theological argument or its strict adherence to rules, although those became important in keeping a diverse and quickly growing movement together and moving in the same direction.

It caught on for the same reason Christianity spread across Asia Minor under Paul and the other Apostles and for the same reason that Luther's Protestant Reformation changed Europe: Leaders of great intellect and persuasive force, with a singular focus on living a life worthy of God's favor, suddenly realized that none of that mattered in the eyes of God.

As Charles Wesley put it at the end of six of the fourteen verses of Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown, “Thy nature and thy name is love;” That Jesus didn't come to save our minds but to save our hearts; that salvation wasn't about believing

the correct things; but about doing all things with love. It had been there all along—from the Torah onward. Love God by loving your neighbor as yourself.

That's not easy, but it's not complex. The youngest infant, the simplest mind, the aged who no longer know the names of their children, all respond in gratitude and joy to warm hearts. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus has never asked us to think correctly but only to love completely.

When those who want to spread the gospel insist on intellectual assent to a creed, however simple, those of us carrying that message have left the path. When those of us seeking holiness look to the letter of the law to carry us to salvation, we seed our road with so many thorns and brambles that we, and those who follow us, are eventually too exhausted and bloodied to continue. Our grim determination to get it right and the seeming impossibility of the task, makes those most in need of the gospel message turn away.

The conversions of both Charles and John Wesley, within three days of each other, had nothing to do with their minds or their strict adherence to holy living, just as it didn't for Martin Luther or for Paul of Tarsus. It was the movement of faith from their heads to their hearts.

By his own account, this sudden warmth felt “strange” to John Wesley, as it does to many whose occupations or temperaments or upbringing make sojourning in the heart seem simplistic, or frightening, or otherwise undesirable.

But the law of Moses is clear, Jesus' summary of the Law and the Prophets is clear, and Paul is clear that, of the trio of faith, hope, and love, it's love—the warm heart that directs our actions—that is the greatest. Love is greater than faith, and greater than all the other spiritual gifts.

What is the thing that can renew the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Same thing that renewed it in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; same thing that renewed it in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; same thing that knocked Paul off his high intellectual horse in the first century and sent the gospel flying out of Jerusalem, across Asia minor, and all the way to Rome. We don't have to earn a spot in God's heart; we're already there. We only need to return the favor. Amen.