SERMONS THAT WORK

Last Sunday After Pentecost (P29) – Christ the King

[RCL] Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

With Eyes of Our Hearts Enlightened

"This have I learned in the ends of the earth, that I am fallen short of the glory of God, that my whole heart is altogether corrupt and abominable." The Rev. John Wesley wrote these words in his journal as he returned home to England. The place he described as the ends of the earth was the Colony of Georgia.

John was the third Anglican priest to come to Georgia. The first died of sickness on the return voyage after weeks in the Colony. The second rector stayed two and a half years in continuous quarrels with the Trustees and colonists alike. Then came the idealistic John Wesley.

He started America's first Sunday School, published the first English hymnal for use in America, and set up a rigorous schedule. John expected everyone to be present for church three times on Sunday, with Morning Prayer at 5 a.m., the Liturgy of the Word and the Litany at 11 a.m., then Evening Prayer and the Catechism at 3 p.m. You can see why one colonist described John Wesley's spiritual leadership as "religious Tyranny."

To make matters worse, John's personal life became a scandal. On the ship from England, the 32-year-old had fallen for Sophia Hopkey, whom he tutored in French. He continued to see her regularly once in Georgia. All assumed their marriage would soon be announced after she nursed the pastor through a fever. But John became convinced that marriage would get in the way of his ministry. He told the apparently infatuated 18-year-old woman that he could not marry until he accomplished his mission to the native population in the new land. This may surprise you less than it did John, but Wesley's words did not strike the young woman as the words of love. Sophia married William Williamson instead. On the day he heard that news, the entry in John's diary read simply, "Could not pray. Tried to pray—lost—sunk."

The pastor excommunicated Sophy a few months later citing "falseness and inconsistency of life"—which created a stir in the small, gossipy colony.

When Wesley had arrived in Savannah, it was a village of two hundred houses. Less than two years later, a 44-person grand jury—making up a significant percentage of the population—approved a 10-count indictment against Wesley, branching from this unjust excommunication of his former beloved. John was felled by a rigid faith and a broken heart. And that is when Wesley wrote the words, "This have I learned in the ends of the earth, that I am fallen short of the glory of God, that my whole heart is altogether corrupt and abominable."

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The Epistle reading for today offers this prayer for the followers of Jesus in Ephesus: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints."

This is exactly what John Wesley experience on his return to England: He had the eyes of his heart enlightened. In the fall of 1738, less than a year after he left Georgia in disgrace, Wesley found his life transformed by grace and mercy. He heard someone read Martin Luther's introduction to Paul's letter to the Romans at a meeting he said he attended unwillingly. He wrote that as he heard the words "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."

John Wesley came to know the sure and certain hope we have in Jesus, and it stunned him to realize that we don't have to work to earn Jesus's love. That love is a free gift of God. Wesley, who had afflicted others with a unbending approach to religion, was surprised by the grace of a God who knew John's heart was altogether corrupt and abominable and yet loved the imperfect pastor wholeheartedly.

John Wesley found redemption not because he deserved it, but because God loved him and wanted better for him. With gratitude for our siblings in Wesley's Methodist Church, we give thanks for a God who knows our imperfections and loves us just the same. The theological concept at the heart of Wesley's conversion is "justification." We are seen by God as just (or righteous), not by virtue of good works, but because of faith alone.

John Wesley would go on to experience sanctification—the process of becoming ever more Christ-like—which is the work of a lifetime and beyond. He frequently preached about sanctification, emphasizing the ongoing work of setting God's will as the aim of our lives. Wesley taught that to set our sights rightly on God, we have the means of grace to assist us in more fully apprehending who God is and how God acts. "The means of grace" is an expression for how the sacraments (especially the Eucharist), together with prayers, and good works, assist us in our faith journey. Some of this, like prayer, we can do alone, but most of the means of grace require other people. To become more and more like Jesus, we need not only God, but we also need Christ's body, the church.

There is an ancient saying in the church: *Unus Christianus—nullus Christianus*. This means "one Christian is no Christian." We cannot do this alone. Jesus did not teach solely us to love God, but also to love our neighbors as ourselves.

To make real progress in becoming more Christ-like, we need others. We've seen how John's heart was warmed because he showed up to that meeting, because he kept showing up in the midst of a community that proclaimed God's love. In the Body of Christ, the church, we have a school for sanctification: for making progress in becoming more Christ-like.

The challenge is to let God enlighten the eyes of our hearts. This means coming to see the face of Christ in everyone we meet—even those we can't at first see as loveable. With the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we can see someone else as God sees them. We might even come to appreciate what God loves about the

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difficult people in our lives. This is how our hearts are transformed. This leads, over time, to an ever-widening circle of those whom we can see as God sees them.

In having the eyes of his heart enlightened, John Wesley came to see everyone as made in the image and likeness of God, which led him to an ever-widening mission to share the love of God with all. Everyone is beloved by the Creator, who wants better for us. God wants better for us than the messes we can make or the ways we can hurt others. We live in a broken world full of hurting people who go on to hurt others.

John Wesley's transformation offers hope. All of us have fallen short of the glory of God. And all of us can experience the mercy and forgiveness John Wesley experienced.

God knows you fully, loves you unreservedly, and wants better for you. Aiming for the life God desires for you is the way of sanctification, becoming more like Jesus.

The love of God is not supposed to be like a pocket warmer, something that keeps you warm while leaving others out in the cold. The means of grace are meant to be shared—they need to be shared. In the church we are blessed with a community of fellow imperfect people, who are perfectly loved by God, and who help one another to inch closer to living into that love. *Amen.*

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