

“John Wesley”

New London UMC

Monday, June 28, 2021

II Peter 1:2-4b; Mark 12:34b; Ephesians 2:8 *KJV*

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Was John Wesley like a little teapot, short and stout?
He was not! As an adult he weighed about 128 pounds and followed a very disciplined daily regimen that he shared in his best-selling work, *Primitive Physic (or An Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases)*. I'll be quoting from the 4th edition, reprinted in London in 1847:



Observe all the time the greatest exactness in your regimen or manner of living. Abstain from all mixed, all high-seasoned food. Use plain diet, easy of digestion: and this as sparingly as you can, consistent with ease and strength. Drink only water, if it agrees with your stomach; if not, good clear, small beer. Use as much exercise daily in the open air as you can without weariness. Sup at six or seven, on the lightest food: go to bed early and rise betimes. To persevere with steadiness in this this course, is often more than half the cure. Above all, add to the rest (for it is not labour lost) that old unfashionable Medicine, Prayer. And have faith in God who “killeth and maketh alive, who bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up.”

That would be the quick outline of his plan. He goes into greater detail in what he calls “a few plain, easy Rules.” The Rules include these helpful hints:

- I. 3. Every one that would preserve health, should be as clean and sweet as possible in the house, clothes and furniture.*
- II. 3. Nothing conduces more to health, than abstinence and plain food, with due labour.*
- II. 5. Water is the wholesomest of all drinks; quickens the appetite and strengthens the digestion most.*
- II. 6. Strong, and most especially spirituous liquors, are a certain, though slow, poison.*
- II. 10. Coffee and tea are extremely hurtful to persons who have weak nerves.*
- III. 1. Tender persons should eat very light suppers: and that two or three hours before going to bed.*
- III. 2. They ought constantly to go to bed about nine, and rise at four or five.*
- IV. 1. A due degree of exercise is indispensably necessary to health and long life.*

IV. 2. Walking is the best exercise for those who are able to bear it; riding for those who are not. The open air, when the weather is fair, contributes much to the benefit of exercise.

Overall, not bad advice – considering that it came from someone who was born in 1703. And as you can see from these two portraits, he stayed in relatively good health throughout his life.



John Wesley was born on June 17, 1703 in Epworth, England and was either the fourteenth or fifteenth child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley. So why are we celebrating his birthday today on June 28? Because in 1752 England adopted the Gregorian calendar – which meant ‘losing’ eleven days during the month of September that year to get in synch with the new calendar. So starting in 1753, John Wesley ‘moved’ his birthday eleven days from the 17th of June to the 28th of June. John Wesley might have been the only person who did this. But to his way of thinking, it was the correct thing to do.

And to John Wesley’s way of thinking he was himself but “a brand plucked from the burning.” Why would he think of himself in that way? Around midnight on Feb. 9, 1709 a fire broke out in the Epworth rectory, and Rev. Samuel Wesley woke up when he heard shouts of, “Fire!” coming from the street. He found his home filling with smoke on the second floor where the bedrooms were. He woke his wife, their three oldest children, and the family maid in the nursery where his five youngest children were. The maid grabbed the youngest child, Charles, and urged the others to follow her out of the house. The only problem with that plan was that John was still asleep and didn’t hear her. He finally woke up when it seemed bright as morning – but soon realized there was a fire. From outside his father heard John’s cries and tried to go back in after him, but the burning stairs gave way. Meanwhile John had climbed up near the window of the nursery and was spotted by people in the yard. A ladder was called for, but before one could be brought – one man

stood up on the shoulders of another man and reached for the child. As John Wesley was caught in the arms of his rescuer, the roof of the house came crashing down into the center of the house. Rev. Wesley exclaimed, “Come, neighbours, let us kneel down. Let us give thanks to God! He has given me all my eight children. Let the house go, I am rich enough.” Susanna Wesley believed that her son’s deliverance from the fire meant that God had special plans for him, and she devoted herself to the care of his soul.

By age seventeen the young firebrand was ready to attend Oxford – having been very rigorously taught by his mother from age five to age eleven, and then distinguishing himself by his aptitude for Latin and Greek in his six years at the Charterhouse School in London. He entered Christ College, Oxford on an academic scholarship. After five years at Oxford his father pressed him to go into the ministry – as his father, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers had. He was ordained a deacon by the Bishop of Oxford in Christ Church Cathedral on September 19, 1725. The next year he became a Fellow of Lincoln College at age 23 and became a Greek Lecturer and Class Moderator. A year later his 65 year old father asked him to take a leave of absence from Oxford in order to assist him at Epworth. He did so and then was ordained a priest on Sept. 22, 1728. After two years John Wesley returned to his faculty position at Lincoln College in Oxford. It was then that he, and his younger brother Charles (who was a student at Christ College), and a group of friends with like minds and interests started meeting regularly to study the classics and to share Christian fellowship. As a faculty member, John Wesley became the leader of the group. Their club met every evening together and became more focused on religion. Members prayed aloud three times a day, and stopped for silent prayer every hour of the day; fasted; attended church services; visited the poor and sick, and those in prison. Other students mocked their seriousness by calling them the Reforming Club, or Godly Club, Holy Club, Sacramentarians, Bible Moths, and Bible Bigots. Even a friend of Charles jokingly remarked on the members’ orderly and methodical way of living by saying, “Well, here is a new sect of Methodists springing up.” The name “Methodists” soon became a popular one for the Wesleys and their friends. John Wesley even came around to accepting it as an appropriate name for his followers, but he had difficulty understanding why they were criticized in the first place. He wrote to his father about it, and his father advised him to “never grow tired of doing good and to keep his eyes focused on the ultimate prize in heaven.” (p. 14, Charles A. Sauer, *A Pocket Story of John Wesley*, 2002)

After his father’s death in 1735, John Wesley felt called to greater devotion and sacrifice to God and agreed to become a missionary in the colony of Georgia. He set sail on Oct. 14, 1735 for America. During the long and difficult voyage Wesley was very impressed by the piety and courage of a group of German Moravians he met onboard. After fifty-seven days they anchored in Savannah, Georgia. By most accounts, over the next two

years Wesley was a dismal failure as a missionary. However, at least three good things came from his missionary effort:

- 1) Wesley's work made a positive impression on George Whitefield, who would later blaze the way for the Evangelical Awakening in England and America;
- 2) Wesley was introduced to Moravian hymns and the Moravian small group accountability structure; and
- 3) Wesley was humbled by his inability to save the colonists, Native Americans, and his own soul through his missionary work.

Upon returning to London, Wesley met Peter Bohler, a devout young Moravian who told him that salvation is not achieved by works, but by faith in the gift of God's pardon and acceptance. Bohler shared the doctrines of justification by faith, entire sanctification, and the witness of the Holy Spirit with Wesley. Wesley found it difficult to believe that the Holy Spirit could instantaneously provide assurance of forgiveness and inner peace, but Bohler encouraged Wesley to continue to preach salvation by faith until he believed it; and then to preach it because he believed it.

On May 21 John Wesley learned that his brother Charles had a conversion experience that had brought him peace of soul and strength of body. And on the morning of May 24 John Wesley opened his Bible to read in the first chapter of Second Peter, "through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these yet might be partakers of the divine nature." And before going out for the day, Wesley opened his Bible once again and read from the Gospel of Mark, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." In the afternoon while at St. Paul's Church these words from an anthem rang in his heart, "O Israel, trust in the Lord." And that evening he unwillingly went to a gathering in Aldersgate Street. Someone was reading from Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans, and "about a quarter to nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, [Wesley] felt [his] heart strangely warmed. [He] felt that [he] did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation" and Wesley felt an assurance that his sins were taken away, and that he was saved from the law of sin and death. (*Journal, May 24, 1738*) At almost thirty-five years of age, John Wesley found himself born anew through this Aldersgate experience. And for the next fifty-three years he was filled with love for Christ and devotion to God – and the burning desire to help others receive the gift of salvation and know the same forgiveness and peace that he did. In later years he came to understand that he had been a **servant** of God prior to his heart being strangely warmed by his receiving the Holy Spirit; but after that experience he became a **child** of God.

Wesley always remained a priest of the established Church of England, and he encouraged what came to be known as members of his Methodist Societies to also attend services and be members of the churches in their communities. But Wesley pressed the limits to his connection with the Church of England. When he was no longer welcomed to preach *in* a parish church he began practicing open-air preaching – often in the graveyard next to a church. This was something that George Whitefield had already done.



And then Wesley began praying extemporaneously instead of reading prayers from the Book of Common Prayer. In time, Wesley also allowed unordained men to become lay preachers to the Societies. They were promised no salaries, but were allowed enough money to cover their expenses during their travels between Societies. They were expected to preach at least twice a day, with sermons to be kept short, and the entire service going no more than one hour; to spend five hours a day reading and studying; and another five hours visiting Society members; and to walk wherever they went. . . . And if you think that schedule was tough, it was less than what Wesley expected of himself.

He often traveled on horseback between different communities (and usually read while riding), and would try to preach and lead Bible studies at least four times a day. He did for decades. Wesley also started holding once a year week-long conferences with his lay and ordained preachers. In the early years they discussed what they would preach and teach in the societies, and later it became a time for theological education. (This practice of coming together continues on as our Annual Conference.) In



addition to preaching, teaching, and conferencing, Wesley found the time to: compile his sermons and have them printed; write and publish his best seller, *Primitive Physic*; and with hymns by his brother Charles, and other contributors, the Wesleys published a new hymnbook almost every year. And, yes, the Methodists became known for their singing.

When Anglican bishops refused to ordain Methodists, Wesley took it upon himself to ordain three preachers who were sent to work in America. Wesley waited years before ordaining laymen to work in England, and only did so because they could then administer the sacrament of Holy Communion. Wesley always encouraged members of the Societies to receive the sacrament as often as they could, and whenever they could. While he never intended to start a new denominational body, Wesley realized that an independent church would probably arise after he died. So he decided to organize a legal holding body,

vested in the Annual Conference, that would have the authority to appoint preachers and would hold the titles of all the Methodist chapels and church property in trust.

Wesley continued to keep a full schedule of preaching and teaching even after he started noting signs of old age in himself (around age 85!): his vision wasn't as sharp as it used to be; his memory of names and faces had declined; and he was walking a bit slower when going uphill. In 1790 he noted that his eyes were dim and his right hand shook, but he could still preach and write and travel. He gave his last open-air sermon on Oct. 7, 1790. He became ill with a fever in late Feb. 1791. He became progressively weaker.

And around ten o'clock in the morning on March 2, 1791, with a group of close friends praying around him, John Wesley died. He had often said that if he died with more than ten pounds, people might call him a thief. It is estimated that he gave away upwards of twenty to thirty thousand pounds during his life. (If I did all the conversions correctly, that would roughly be \$2,780,000 to \$4,170,000 today.) So in the spirit of John Wesley I encourage you to do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, as long as ever you can.

Amen.

