

“THE BURNING HEART”

Sterling UMC
November 15, 2009
Romans 3:21-26

You may not know me, but I'm sure you have heard my name. This past May I turned 271 years old. You see on May 24, 1738, when I was 35 years old I was truly born. Let me tell you a little bit about myself – my pilgrimage – my journey of faith. My name is Wesley, John Wesley.

I was born the son of an Anglican priest. I grew up one of 12 children in the parsonage. I was faithfully instructed in the faith by my father, Samuel and mother Suzanna. So it was natural that when I grew up I follow father's footsteps.

My parents saw to it that I received the best possible education. I wanted to prepare for ordination and so I enrolled in Oxford in London.

At Oxford I along with my brother Charles and several others formed what was called the “Holy Club.” Our desire was to please God. We sought to do this in three specific areas: 1) improving in holiness, 2) love of God, 3) love of my neighbor.

Our methods were rigorous and intense. We spent hours every day in prayer, nearly continuous study of the Scripture, fasting, meeting with other members of the group for direction and accountability, regular attendance of the worship and sacraments of the church, and service to the poor. It was because of this we were first called, “Methodists,” a label given to us as an insult.

And yet there was something missing in my heart - I felt I couldn't do enough, I lacked assurance. There was no peace in my soul.

Still searching and seeking that assurance, I decided to take a trip to America - to the colony of Georgia to preach to the Indians. It was a horrible experience. It felt as if my preaching was just “Beating the air.” After 1 year 9 months I returned to England greatly discouraged. I summed it up with this journal entry, “I went to America to convert Indians, but who shall convert me?”

On the voyage home I met the Moravian missionary Peter Bohler. We had many conversations. He could sense my struggle. One day he said to me - “I will tell you what is wrong with you. You are putting your dependence upon your own works and monastic practices. The only way to have a real religion is to put your dependence upon Jesus Christ and to forget about all other methods.”

Then came the memorable day - May 24, 1738. I arose about 4 AM., blindly opened the Bible and placed his finger on a text and read, “Thou are not far from the Kingdom of God.” In the afternoon I went to St. Paul's Cathedral and heard the choir sing, “Out of

the Deep Have I Cried Unto Thee, O Lord.” Then at night I went “very unwillingly” to a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street where the lay leader was reading from Luther’s “Preface to Romans” and that was when it happened. That was when I was truly born. For there I was born again. There I had my “Heart warming” experience. This is how I described it in my journal.

“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.”

That, my friends was the experience that so affected John Wesley that this ineffective academic became an apostle and his ministry became clothed with new power, his language became sharp, and his zeal without bounds. That was the experience that ignited a movement that swept through England and spread like wildfire through the American colonies. Out of that experience the Methodist church was born.

“Aldersgate, wrote an editor, was, “that spark of fire that set 10,000 other hearts on fire, and the Methodist Church was born.” I submit to you today that what our church desperately needs is rekindling of that spark to set us on fire again. The United Methodist Church has its roots in “Born Again” religion and I believe we need to catch this fire again in our day.

Methodism was born in a “heart warming” experience but today in most of our churches, if you judge by growth and programs that burning heart has become a dying ember. We loyal sons and daughters of John Wesley pledge our dedication to the institution of the church but not necessarily to the presence of Jesus Christ alive and living within us.

A young boy heard that a circus was coming to a nearby town. Thrilled at the chance of going, he asked his father for a silver dollar and the use of the horse to go to the circus. That was the longest seven miles that any nine-year old boy ever rode, so great was his anticipation. When he came to the town, he hitched his horse to the hitching post, made his way through the crowd, and looked down the street. Wonder of wonders, there came the circus: The giraffes with their tall necks, the caged animals - lions, tigers, monkeys, and all the others, the big brass band, playing as only a circus band could play; and those wonderful clowns, acting as only clowns could act! It seemed as if one of the clowns was headed straight for the boy. As he approached, the lad reached into his pocket, took out the silver dollar, and put it in the hand of the clown. The clown bowed in all regal splendor. The circus parade passed on its way. The boy went back, unhitched his horse and returned to the farm. It wasn’t until sometime later that he discovered he had not seen the circus at all. He had only seen the parade.

How much this is like us in our faith! We march in the parade of religion, but we never get under the big top. We say our prayers, sing our hymns, recite our creeds, go through our acts of worship, serve on committees, prepare the church dinners, sing in the choir, involve ourselves in other church organizations - that is to say march in the parade; but we never come to know Jesus Christ as a personal Lord and Savior. He never really comes alive in our souls.

You see it is possible for us to know all about Jesus Christ and yet not know him - to be able to tell the great events of his life, and yet never let his life live within our hearts. That was the lesson that took John Wesley so many painful years to learn.

How is it with you this morning? Do you know Jesus Christ as a live and living reality in your own soul? Or do you just know about him as one of the characters who marched across the stage of history? Have you had an Aldersgate experience where Jesus Christ came alive in your heart? Or are you merely walking in the footsteps of others, repeating what they have found to be true? Do you know this man? Or do you just know about him?

Walt Whitman, the great American poet, tells of attending a lecture on astronomy; but he said the hall became smoky, the air stale, and the charts dull and unilluminating. "I could stand it no longer," he said, "So I ran outside, threw my head up and communed with the stars first-hand." So many of us never think of doing that with Jesus Christ. We prefer to remain inside, to labor over the charts and diagrams of religion, its hymns, its creeds and its prayers. We never think of communing with Christ first-hand, of having an Aldersgate experience wherein Christ comes alive within our own souls. But we cannot go on this way. This is why we find ourselves so insecure. Because there is no foundation, there is nothing on which we can depend. Our faith never really comes alive. Peace never floods our soul. This is why our churches are so weak and ineffective. We never come into that life-saving experience symbolized by Wesley at Aldersgate.

But what a difference it makes when it does, when Jesus Christ comes alive in us and our hearts catch fire. Our faith comes alive. Our lives are filled new purpose and meaning. There is an overwhelming sense of joy and peace. Even Jesus himself is different, His Word comes alive and we are filled with the living presence of His Holy Spirit. And our churches are different. There is fresh sense of excitement and anticipation in the worship, hearts and lives are changed, people hunger and thirst to grow in their discipleship, there is a new passion to serve the hungry, the poor and outcast, and there is a burning desire to see the lost come to the Lord. In short we stop playing church, and become "the Church".

Until then our faith has no real foundation for the dangers and difficulties of life. No one knew this more than John Wesley. At one point on his missionary voyage, Wesley's was caught in a terrible storm in the middle of the Atlantic. The winds were fierce and the waves tumultuous. All aboard stood in grave danger. John Wesley too was afraid. He noticed that everybody aboard was afraid except a tiny band of Moravian missionaries. Wesley sought out the leader of this band and said "Aren't you afraid?" "Me afraid?" said the leader. "Why should I be afraid? I know Jesus Christ." Then it was that Wesley realized that although he knew all about Jesus Christ, though he had been preaching about Him for years, he did not really know Him as a personal savior.

Until Jesus Christ has come alive within us we know that our life is incomplete. Until then life for us is a giant jigsaw puzzle, the total picture of which cannot be viewed until all the parts have been found and put into their proper place. Only there is one piece missing and we know that our life is incomplete. But when we have an Aldersgate experience, all the parts fall into place, and peace and power flood our souls. So then when the storms of life lash out at us we can stand firm knowing if "God is for us, who can be against." (Romans 8:31)

How can we have an Aldersgate experience? How can Christ come alive within us? Scripture is crystal clear on this matter. Our text says it happens “through faith in Jesus Christ.”(Romans 3:22) It does not come from our own merit or good work, for the Scripture goes on to say, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) It comes freely by his grace!

Listen to how Wesley himself describes it in a sermon that he preached just 18 days after his new life experience;

“Christian faith is then, not only an assent to the whole Gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ; a trust in the merits of his life, death and resurrection; a recumbency upon Him as our atonement and our life, as given for us, and living in us.”

In other words as we give up our vain attempts to please God in our own strength, admit our need for him, and accept and embrace his atoning work on the cross.

My friends, God is still in the business of changing hearts. The same love and grace that set John Wesley’s heart ablaze is available to you and me today. All we have to do is to call out to Him in faith and we can find that peace of God that passes all understanding. Jesus Christ can live within us and then, in the words of Paul, we can say “It is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20)

There is a true story about the Wesleyan Chapel in Nottingham, England, where General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was kneeling in prayer when he had his conversion experience. In the floor of that little chapel, there is a plaque commemorating this great moment. Into that chapel came a man from the Salvation Army, and to the caretaker he said, “Is this the chapel where William Booth had his conversion experience?” “Yes,” said the caretaker. “Can you show me where it happened?” he asked. “Oh yes, come”. And he took him to this marker, and said; “Here is where the great man was kneeling in prayer when it took place”. “Oh,” said the visitor, “May I kneel on this spot too?” “Of course,” said the caretaker. So down he went on his knees and up went his arms in prayer and he said, “Oh, God, do it again! Do it again!”

As we remember Aldersgate and this transforming experience of John Wesley which set the world on fire for Christ and His church, that is my prayer and hope that it is your prayer as well; “Oh God, do it again! Do it again!”