



***Revival: Living the Methodist Way***  
**“I FELT MY HEART STRANGELY WARMED”**

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Scripture: Romans 5:1-8

There is a story, perhaps even fictional, but part of the lore that surrounded the life of Andrew Carnegie. He began his business life with little money but amassed a huge fortune. By the time he was at middle age, Carnegie stayed pretty much to himself and traveled in his own private railroad car.

He carried with him a servant, who served as valet. When Carnegie boarded his train in the evening, he would light up a cigar, pick up the newspaper and begin to read. He instructed his valet that he was not to be disturbed, and no conversation would take place unless he initiated it. One evening, just as he had settled in with his paper and cigar, Carnegie’s servant approached rather timidly and interrupted him. Carnegie said, “Is the train on fire?”

He was told it was not, so Carnegie asked the servant to be quiet. However, the servant persisted and urged him to get off the car. Carnegie was furious and demanded to know what, in fact, was wrong with his railroad car, the finest money could buy. The servant replied, “There ain’t nothing wrong with this car, sir. It just ain’t tied to nothing.”

So many of us today don’t want to be tied to anything. We hesitate to commit ourselves. We don’t want to make promises. We want to keep our options open. We need to be flexible. But like Carnegie’s railroad car, if we aren’t tied to anything, we can’t move very effectively. We think the opposite. If we aren’t tied down, we have more freedom. But that’s not usually how it works. When we aren’t tied to anything, we often blindly and ill-advisedly seize every movement and possibility that looks good, or else we don’t move at all. It’s making commitments, it’s keeping promises, it’s being loyal, it’s taking risks and it’s knowing what we believe that makes things happen in this world.

You and I, as members and friends of First United Methodist Church, are tied to our Methodist heritage. Even if we haven’t grown up Methodist, even if this is the first Methodist church we have ever attended, it’s important to know about our roots. Gary and I believe that United Methodism has much to offer our world. One of the greatest gifts we offer is the warmed heart. It’s been said that you’re a United Methodist if, when your heart is strangely warmed, you don’t need to reach for the Alka-Seltzer or a Tums. If you don’t get that joke you probably weren’t raised Methodist.

In 1729, a few years after John Wesley had been ordained to the priesthood in the Anglican Church and served alongside his father in Epworth, John was asked to come back to Oxford University to teach. At the time his brother, Charles, was a member of a small group of Oxford students who met regularly for study and spiritual growth. John was invited to join the group and soon became their unofficial leader. This group practiced the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, fasting, communion and engaging in social work, especially visiting Oxford prisons and caring for the poor. John was restless, however. He believed that God demanded more of him.

After their father died in 1735, John and Charles enlisted as missionaries and traveled to Georgia. John had three goals: to minister to the English colonists in Savannah, to convert the Native Americans to Christianity, and to gain an assurance of his own that God loved him. Wesley was struggling with his faith at the time and wrote, "I went to America to convert the Indians, but, oh, who shall convert me?"

John's mission lasted for less than two years and was not a success. Although he labored faithfully, Wesley was too strict and not always sensitive to the needs of his parishioners, who responded with indifference and sometimes even hostility. One good thing that came out of this experience is that John got to know a group of Moravians, German pietists who taught a simple, personal faith within an intimate, disciplined fellowship. Wesley envied their confident trust and experience of God's presence.

After returning to England, Wesley was spiritually distressed and even more restless. He wanted a faith that completely trusted God. On May 24, 1738, John Wesley attended a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. Listen to how Wesley himself described what happened: "In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where he 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." (*Journal*, I, pp. 475-76)

John Wesley finally realized that the holiness he sought does not begin with human striving. It begins by trusting the pardoning and empowering grace of God in Jesus Christ. After this experience, Wesley again became engrossed in religious activity, but this time it was with a warmed heart. As Wesley went from place to place to preach, with no settled parish, he observed that people's lives were being changed by God's forgiving grace.

You know what today is, don't you? It's May 24, 277 years after John Wesley's experience at Aldersgate, which was truly a turning point in his life. It was *not* at Aldersgate where Wesley resolved to live a holy life. It's *not* where Wesley dedicated his total existence to the service of God. And it's *not* where he received the compassion to minister to the poor.

No, it was at Aldersgate where Wesley gained assurance of his salvation. Until then, he was made weary by the belief that a condition of salvation was being a worthy servant. At Aldersgate, Wesley's heart was warmed by the unconditional love of God. From that time on, his spirit was at peace with the promise that no matter how many souls he saved, and no matter how

many times he failed, he was assured of God's grace. But today is not only Aldersgate Day, it's Pentecost Sunday, when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the disciples of Jesus, and the Christian church was born.

**So, what does Methodism offer to the world today? First, we offer assurance.** In one of his sermons, Wesley writes, "The Spirit of God bears constant witness in believers that they enjoy a new standing with God... The stormy wind and troubled waves subside, and there is a sweet calm; the heart resting as in the arms of Jesus." (*The Witness of the Spirit II*, 1767)

Oh, how much our world needs the assurance of God's love. There is nothing we can do to earn God's favor. All we need to do is turn to God in faith. Paul says in Romans 5, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

When I was a teenager, I struggled with my faith, as many young people do. I couldn't help but think that being a Christian hinged on how good I was. The problem was, I felt I never did enough to deserve God's love. So I kept doing more good works, thinking that would help my status with God. But I felt empty inside. When people would ask if I was a Christian, I would say, "I don't know." I really didn't know because I felt I wasn't good enough to call myself a Christian. It was only after an Aldersgate-like experience when I was 20 years old that I gave my life in faith to Jesus and first felt the assurance of God's love. It was like a tremendous weight lifted off my shoulders. I was finally able to slow down my frenetic Christian activity and simply rest in the arms of Jesus.

Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying works aren't important. In addition to personal holiness, Wesley emphasized social holiness; that is, visiting the prisoner, tending to the sick and feeding the poor. Doing good works is also a gift of Methodism to the world. In the end, however, what ties you and me to God and to the legacy of John Wesley is a personal faith in Jesus Christ. It's that trust in Christ alone for salvation that calms our restless soul.

**A second thing Methodism offers to the world is a warmed heart.** Christianity is not just an academic exercise. We don't become a Christian by memorizing scriptures or reading the entire Bible or even taking a class from Professor Todd Hibbard (sorry, Todd!). No, the warmed heart is not something we know, it's something we feel in the very core of our being.

When you come to First Church and sit here on Sunday mornings, I hope you are challenged and intellectually stimulated by the sermons, the music and the prayers. I hope they make you think. I hope you leave, saying, "I agreed with this, and I liked that, but I think she was way off base when she said this." But you know what I hope most of all? I hope you feel God's presence in your spirit. I hope you feel God's love moving in and among the people of this congregation. And I hope your heart is warmed as God speaks words of comfort, assurance and challenge.

**Finally, Methodism offers the world joy.** What is the result of a heart warmed by the love of Jesus Christ? Why, it's joy. Joy. Remember, joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness is directly tied to what happens in our lives. Joy, on the other hand, is independent of circumstances. Joy is a deep sense of connection with God. We experience joy because we are tied to God in faith.

Certainly, we Methodists can do a little better in expressing our joy outwardly. Do you ever see people get all excited about the Tigers, Red Wings, Lions, Michigan State or the U of M? Of course you do. They cheer wildly. They stand the whole time. They even shout themselves hoarse. But when the same people come to church, they sit like lumps on a log, won't talk to anyone and don't even open their mouths to sing. It confuses me to see people enjoy everything in life except worship, like it's some sort of bitter medicine that is somehow good for us.

A number of years ago, Gary and I attended a conference and heard Rev. Wayne Cordeiro speak. Wayne is the founding pastor of the megachurch New Hope Christian Fellowship in Honolulu, Hawaii and has planted over 125 churches around the Pacific Rim.

Wayne told about how one time some cheerleaders from the University of Hawaii began attending the church and asked Wayne if they could do flips during the service. Wayne was a little hesitant at first. It's a church where almost everything goes as far as expressing the joy of faith, but flips? Wayne said he prayed about it and finally told them, "Go ahead and flip for God. Go for it. Flip for God!" You see, that's how these cheerleaders could express the joy of their faith. That's what they could do for God. They were preaching the gospel through their cheerleading routine.

Now, if one of you wants to do some flips during the Chancel Choir anthem to express your joy in Christ, talk to us. It might be kind of fun. Just let us know ahead of time. Actually, Robert, someone mentioned this morning that you might do a few flips for us as a kind of initiation into your work here as our Duke Divinity School intern for the summer. Are you up for it? We'll give you a few weeks to practice.

We need to do a better job of expressing our joy. We need to smile more. We need to laugh more. We need to loosen up a little bit. We may even need to dance a little more and move a little more and say a few more "amens."

But you know what? Joy goes far deeper than our outward expressions. Joy is far more profound than simply an emotional feeling. Have you ever wondered why John Wesley said his heart was *strangely* warmed? What did Wesley mean by "strangely"? Methodist literature abounds with sentimentalism in discussing the warmed heart, but we hardly ever correlate it with what Wesley wrote in the next paragraph after saying his heart was strangely warmed. He wrote, "It was not long before the enemy suggested, 'This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?'"

Evidently, people were complaining to Wesley, "You say you have a warmed heart, but you don't show it! If you aren't always bubbling over with happiness, you can't have faith." Wesley's response was that the reality of life is that God gives, and God takes away. We Christians don't always have transports of ecstasy in our life, and we don't always feel happiness, and we can't always bounce around doing flips. Strangely enough, however, we can still experience joy, even in the most tragic of circumstances. It's a deep, quiet, abiding, strange, warm joy which comes from a divine conviction that God works within our soul. We can rely on the promises of the Gospel even when we don't feel like doing flips.<sup>1</sup>

I think you know what I'm talking about. We experience a strangely warmed heart when we celebrate the life of a soldier, one of God's faithful children who died in service to his or her country; when we sit with a family in the hospital waiting for some word about a loved one's surgery; or when we pray with a mother and father for a child who is in the throes of addiction. It's the strangely warmed heart that ties us to God and to each other.

Is your heart strangely warmed today? Are you willing to be tied to God through faith in Jesus Christ? Do you trust in Christ, Christ alone, for your salvation? Do you feel the peace and calm that come from the assurance of God's love? Do you know in the very depths of your being that you are a child of God? Have you opened your heart enough so that God can come in and revive it and warm it for you? Have you experienced that strange joy which comes from knowing that whatever happens, God will be there? It's living the Methodist Way: assurance, a warmed heart, joy. That's what United Methodists offer to our world.

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<sup>1</sup>Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 1960, p. 105.