

“From Glory Into Glory”

Date: May 29, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 2 Peter 1:3-11; Mark 12:28-34a

Theme: Grace; Methodist History

Occasion: Heritage Sunday

Last Sunday was designated as Heritage Sunday in the UMC. It is usually the Sunday closest to May 24th, a special day in the life of Methodism, for it marks the occasion that we affectionately refer to as Aldersgate Day, the day when John Wesley had a spiritual awakening that he referred to as “my heart was strangely warmed.”

A little background to set the stage. Very early in his career, shortly after finishing seminary, he and his brother Charles went to the colony of Georgia to do missionary work. At the time, John loved the Lord and was working as hard as he could to serve God. He was almost obsessive-compulsive about his Christian work, trying to serve the Lord.

Perhaps it was his inexperience. Perhaps it was his naivete. Perhaps there was something in his attitude. But John was not very successful in his early missionary work. In fact he was pretty much a failure. John returned to his native country of England, feeling as though his life was in shambles.

He had failed to convert the Native Americans to Christianity. He had failed to make much of a Christian impression on the colonists in Georgia. And he failed in his attempts at love, actually being chased out of town by the governor for offending his daughter by refusing her communion. But that’s another story for another day.

Wesley had made such a mess of his personal life and ministry that he had to leave the colony just one step ahead of the law. Now, he doubted his call to ministry. He even doubted that he had any faith at all. But the evening of May 24th, 1738 was to change his life.

The two scriptures that were read today were among the passages that he had read that day. God was working in his heart, using the scriptures to speak to this wounded preacher. That evening, a friend of John's invited him to attend a prayer meeting of a group of Christians known as Moravians. The place of the meeting was on Aldersgate Street, hence the name of this special remembrance.

John didn't feel like going, but at his friend's insistence he finally gave in and went. Feeling totally empty inside, as if God was not real for him, he sat on the wooden chair and listened, without real interest at first. The group leader got up and began to read a portion of Martin Luther's comments on Paul's letter to the Romans.

The Holy Spirit worked on John Wesley as he heard the leader speak about God's grace and our faith. About that moment, Wesley later wrote that "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that God had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death."

Wesley now understood in his heart that God did not hold his sins against him.

And John Wesley was ready for God to use him, to raise up the people called Methodists for the renewal of the church. One of the hallmarks of Methodism is our belief in assurance, that people can have the assurance that their sins are forgiven.

Two weeks ago I had the honor and the privilege of attending the 2011 Pastor's Academy at Olmsted Manor. Our guest speaker was Dr. Paul Chilcote, professor of Wesleyan studies at Ashland Theological Seminary in Ohio. What a treat that was, to learn from one of the finest Wesleyan scholars alive today. Very

highly respected.

The title of his series of five lectures was called: “The Wesleyan Way: Rediscovering Ancient-Future Methodism.” His premise was, that in recalling the beginning of our faith tradition, we will find answers to many of the problems that plague the contemporary church. I’m not going to give you all eight hours of his lecture.

He was good, but I’m not going to read you all of my notes. There is grace!

And *that* was the topic of his first lecture: *grace*. Dr. Chilcote said that the message that the early Methodists preached, that we need to remember today, is the centrality of grace. The centrality of grace. Here is how he defined grace, and I really like his definition. He said:

“Grace is the power of the Holy Spirit, enabling us to believe, love and serve God.” Now, this is the place in the sermon where I would turn to my power-point, if I had one, to help you see the message and better remember it. But without a projector and a screen, let me simply ask you to repeat after me:

“Grace - is the power of the Holy Spirit - enabling us - to believe - love - and serve God.” In one of Wesley’s most well known sermons, entitled “Free Grace” he makes three points: 1. Grace is a free gift. 2. That gift is free to all. And 3: that grace is in all. In other words, God’s grace surrounds us. It’s everywhere, beckoning us, wooing us with God’s love. God wants to have a relationship with God’s people.

Dr. Chilcote went on to say that the grace of Creation is the first dramatic act of grace. It’s the way that God gets our attention. Every human being is aware of the Creation, and thus every person should be in awe of the created order. God did not have to create the universe. God was complete, in God’s Self, prior to Creation.

But the nature of love is to reach beyond itself. And so God created the universe. Wow!

Wesley called this first movement of grace “prevenient grace.” It is that work of God that goes before us. It’s the work of God preparing us to be in relationship with God. Even before we knew that we needed God, God was trying to win our hearts.

Wesley goes on to talk about the next two movements of grace, which are the pillars of Methodist theology. The first of these two movements of grace is what God has done for *us* in Jesus Christ. The second movement is what God is doing *in* us. These two movements of grace, combined together, are what make Methodism so unique in all of Christianity.

The first grace theologians call justification. This is the work of Jesus Christ *for* us. It’s the familiar Gospel message that most of us know so well. Jesus lived, taught, died and was resurrected, so that we could have forgiveness of sin. God’s grace, at work in our lives, makes it possible for us to believe, to trust in God’s love for us.

The second act of grace theologians call sanctification. This is what God is doing *in* us through the Holy Spirit, enabling us to embrace God’s love more fully. Chilcote, paraphrasing Wesley, put it this way. When we are justified, God saves us FROM our sins. When God sanctifies us, or makes us holy, God saves us FOR something.

Do you know what that something is? We are saved FOR love. We are set free from our sin so that we can be free TO love God and others more fully. Being saved is not the end of our salvation story, simply getting ready for the rapture, if and when it comes. Sorry, Harold Camping. That is not enough, not enough for

John Wesley or for his followers the Methodists.

We are saved from our sin, so that we can be like Jesus. We are to share God's love as often as we can, with as many people as we can, in all the ways we can. We are to spread God's love, thankful for what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ.

Here's where Wesley had it wrong before Aldersgate. He was trying to please God with all of his good works. After Aldersgate, Wesley still did good works, but it was as a response to God's love shown in Jesus Christ.

More and more, day be day, we are to be transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit. Wesley preached a gospel of holiness and perfection, believing that it was possible, not to be perfect - that is without making mistakes. But it is possible to be perfect in loving God and loving others.

Here is the challenge for modern day Methodists - to embrace the ancient Methodist teachings, and live into the future. God has set us free from our sins. Do you have that assurance in your heart? Do you know for certain that Christ died for you, for your sins? Has the Holy Spirit given you the assurance that you are forgiven?

Praise God, if you do. Get down on your knees and repent if you don't. It is possible to know, this very day, to know that your sins have been forgiven, and God has come into your life to heal you.

And once we have the assurance, we begin a life-long journey of holiness, growing in the likeness of Jesus. Serving the poor. Feeding the hungry. Housing the homeless. Responding to the victims of tornados and hurricanes and earthquakes. And telling others the good news of God's love for them.

If we have the assurance of salvation, our spiritual journey is not over. We

can't sit back and wait for Jesus to come and take us home. We are compelled by the Holy Spirit to live lives of compassion and service. Why? Because it reflects the love of God so that others can see and know.

This is hard work - to love the unloveable, the ones that others would rather walk away from. But this is the work of grace. It is the power of the Holy Spirit enabling us to believe, to love and to serve God. This unique message of the early Methodists is the ancient message of the Bible, and the hope of generations to come.

In our closing hymn, written by John's brother Charles, we see the unique Methodist theology in each of the four stanzas. Verse 1 talks about justifying grace. Verse 2 is all about sanctifying grace. Verse 3 speaks of going on to perfection. I want more of God in my life. And verse 4 is about consummation, Revelation 21 - God will bring it all to glorious perfection, as we are changed from glory into glory. Amen!

Let us stand and sing our Methodist, Christian faith.