

Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived It sermon series***“A Longing for Holiness”***[1 Peter 1:13-16](#)

We are on the second Sunday of the six-week sermon series, “Revival,” inspired by Rev. Adam Hamilton’s book of the same title. Through this series, we are learning about the early Methodist movement and the life of John Wesley, who led a church revival movement during the 18th century in England and across America. Last week, we examined his childhood years, and today we will look at the years of his study and teaching at Oxford University.

In 1720, at the age of 17, John Wesley entered Christ Church College, one of the most prestigious colleges on the campus of Oxford University. He enjoyed his life at Oxford as a typical college student, studying the Classics and logic, hanging out with his classmates at the coffee house, playing chess and cards games, as well as sweating at the tennis court and rowing on the river. It was during this period that Wesley started to keep a diary, which became a daily habit that he kept up for the rest of his life.

After completing his bachelor’s degree at the age of 21 in 1724, Wesley began to work on his master’s degree and he also decided to pursue ordination, strongly encouraged by his parents. And it was when he sought ordination that Wesley became more serious about his faith. He began to read devotional materials, including Jeremy Taylor’s *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Living*, Thomas a Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ*, and William Law’s *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, all of which made a great impact on him.

Through his devotional studies, Wesley realized that he was only “half a Christian” or “almost a Christian.” He became aware that there was more to faith than he had known before. He began to sense a growing desire in his heart for something more, to go deeper, to become “altogether a Christian.” So, he resolved to be more intentional about his spiritual life; to dedicate all of his life - all of his thoughts, words, and actions - to God; to do everything for the glory of God; to love God with everything he had.

In 1726, while he was still working on his master’s degree and ordination, Wesley was elected to a fellowship at Lincoln College at Oxford University and became a faculty member with teaching responsibilities. He taught Greek, logic and philosophy. Wesley was proud of being a fellow at Oxford, which came with lodging and meal privileges. He took a break from his teaching for over a year after he was ordained a priest in order to help his father with his church ministry. Then, he took a longer break to lead the Methodist movement beyond the school campus. But, he never formally left his teaching position at Oxford until 1751 when he married. At that time, only singles were allowed to be fellows.

In the meanwhile, John’s younger brother, Charles also entered Christ Church College. He noticed the failing spiritual state of the students at his school and became greatly concerned about it. To counteract the spiritual apathy on the campus, Charles began to meet with a fellow student who shared his concern and was serious about growing in faith, and he invited professor John to join them in their gatherings.

Soon, they picked up another student and began to meet multiple times a week for prayers and reading the Bible and other Christian writings. Together, they attended worship services and received weekly Holy Communion. Their meetings were so methodical with strict rules, that fellow students and professors began to call them “Methodists,” which eventually became our official name.

Despite the ridicule and criticism they faced, members of the small group continued to meet regularly with great devotion. Several months after they began to meet, they added visiting prisoners to their regular group activities. Then, they continued to add more - calling on the elderly, caring for the poor, working with underprivileged children, and even hiring a teacher to help with children’s education. Later, these ministries became essential marks of Methodism - pursuing not only personal holiness through spiritual discipline but also social holiness through compassion and acts of mercy. Wesley viewed these two activities of loving God and loving neighbor as two sides of the same coin. I will talk more about social holiness later in this sermon series.

There are a few things that are worth noting about these initial small group gatherings because they are so closely associated with our Methodist tradition and identity.

First, the small group gatherings provided the fertile ground for the birth of the 18th century Methodist revival, and the members of the first small group were all intellectuals - three college students and one college professor. Usually, the word, revival, is perceived to be associated with emotions. But, this was not the case for the Methodist revival. Its leader was a college professor, and he cultivated his heart and passion for the revival of the church at his regular meetings with college students who asked questions of faith, while seeking the renewal of their hearts.

With Wesley’s influence, the Methodist revival sought a balance between emotion and intellect, head and heart from the very beginning, and this balance became a defining mark of Methodism. Some churches tell their members not to question anything in the Bible and accept it flatly as the word of God. But, part of our tradition and legacy as Methodists is to ask questions of faith freely and use reason to interpret scriptures.

Second, the small group gatherings were on a college campus. It would be considered campus ministry in today’s terms. Because of this unique nature of our beginnings, from early on, the Methodist movement emphasized the importance of higher education. As a result, we have hundreds of Methodist colleges and universities in the US and around the world. They are found both in major metropolitan cities and small towns. Today, there are 88 4-year United Methodist colleges and universities in the US, and according to a recent report, 13 of them ranked among the top 100 of Liberal Arts schools.

Across the country, the Methodist campus ministry is called “Wesley Foundation.” Probably, some of you were involved in it during your college years. This past July, the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference appointed my son, Joe to the campus ministry at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. His mission is to create Wesley Foundation at the school. After a couple of months of praying, training and networking, Joe will soon begin to meet with students in small groups, just as John Wesley did with students at Oxford University. With pride and gratitude, I am already rejoicing with him for the new

Methodist campus ministry that is about to be birthed at this major state university. And, I covet your prayers for him and for the students he is reaching out to with Christ's love.

Third, one common thing among the 4 members of the small group was their longing for holiness. For them, holiness meant completely surrendering one's life to God, living one's life solely for the glory of God, and desiring to become like Christ in one's personal and public life.

Wesley sought this holiness through his disciplined lifestyle. Here are some of his spiritual disciplines and practices: He rose early in the morning to pray; He fasted 2 days a week until mid-afternoon; He read, studied, and meditated on the Bible and other Christian writings every day; He held himself and other Christians accountable for keeping a disciplined lifestyle through small group gatherings; Together with his small group members, he attended worship service and received Holy Communion every week; With them, he actively pursued social holiness, acts of compassion and mercy for the least and the last in the world and sought to live a life of simplicity and generosity.

As you know, my daughter recently delivered her second child, a girl. Like any other new born baby, all she does is eat and sleep. Of course, she poops and pees and cries, too in between. It's been about 18 days since her birth, and she already looks much fuller in her cheeks, her arms, and legs. It's all because of the milk she drinks from her mommy every two hours. It's really fascinating. As long as she keeps eating the food her mommy provides for her, she will continue to grow.

Watching my granddaughter grow so fast and beautifully has made me think about my spiritual growth. As her growth has delighted me, I am sure God also delights in my spiritual growth. But, I wonder, am I still growing? Am I taking in the spiritual nourishment that I need to be able to grow spiritually?

John Wesley's life at Oxford teaches us that we are fed spiritually through the spiritual practices we adopt. What are the spiritual practices which give you the spiritual nourishment that you need to grow spiritually?

Today's scripture reading says, "Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" (1 Peter 1:14-16)

Do you have a longing for holiness? If your answer is no, do not be discouraged because Wesley did not have it either. It was only when he became more serious about growing in faith and began to commit to his spiritual practices that he discovered a longing for holiness. Until then, he did not even know that he had it in him, buried in the deepest corners of his heart. So, start with one simple spiritual practice and stick to it until you begin to notice a change in your heart - a beginning of a longing for holiness. And, consider doing it with other Christians in a small group, as Wesley did.

For some reason, their gatherings never grew in size. Actually, Wesley's ministry at Oxford University never attracted large numbers. Yet, the group of 4 - one professor and three students who had a longing for holiness - started a new movement that changed the whole world. And it is this movement that we are the legacies of, as United Methodists.

Today, as we face a crossroads in our denomination, I wonder, what would it mean if we committed to a renewal of our hearts? What would it mean, in the face of the uncertainty in our church lives and our personal lives, if we committed fully to the work of cultivating our hearts? What would it mean to completely surrender our lives to God, living our lives solely for the glory of God, and desiring to become like Christ in our personal and public life?

Would you pray with me?