

Celebrating the Wesley Brothers  
January 27, 2007  
Holy Trinity UMC, Danvers, MA.

Matthew 4: 12 – 23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup>He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup>so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: <sup>15</sup>“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— <sup>16</sup>the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” <sup>17</sup>From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

<sup>18</sup>As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup>And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>20</sup>Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup>As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup>Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

<sup>23</sup>Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

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Susannah Wesley: Let me introduce myself to you and share some of the stories from my life. I am Susanna Wesley, mother of the well known brothers, John and Charles Wesley, whose legacy has surely influenced your faith journey as Methodists.

I was born in January of 1669 the last of 25 children in the Annesley family. My father, Dr. Samuel Annesley was a well-known, powerful minister. My parents were gracious, tireless workers who kept a pleasant home and my father's study was a hub of intellectual activity where many famous men of the day debated on current issues. I met my future husband, Samuel Wesley, when I was 13 and he was 19. His name at that time was Westly, with a “t” in the middle, which he removed shortly after we met. We were married when I was 19. Just prior to our marriage, Samuel was ordained as a priest in the Church of England. Over the years, I birthed 19 children, ten of whom lived into adulthood. Our life was not an easy one, and I tried to preside over the family with grace and firmness despite our abject poverty.

I insisted on having bible study with the children each morning. It was from the Great Book that each of them learned to read. During one of my husband’s absences – he was in London for an extended period of time for meetings – I began the practice of reading sermons to the children on Sunday afternoon. I found these sermons in books in the

family library. At first the audience was just the family, which was no small congregation in itself. But pretty soon servants from the neighborhood homes were coming. The numbers grew quickly from 40 to over 200. It turned out that more people were attending my Sunday afternoon readings than were coming to church on Sunday morning. The assistant rector who was filling in for my husband, Samuel, was offended and tried to put an end to them. However, I was bold and said that I was only doing good for the sake of the gospel.

My son John was born on June 17, 1703 and Charles was born a little over 4 years later on December 18, 1707 while we were living at the Epworth rectory. When John, who we called Jackie, was only 4, he was rescued out of a window in the burning rectory. I took this as a sign of Providence and remember saying to my friends and neighbors, "Is this not a brand plucked from the burning?" That rescue marked him for life.

As the scripture recorded this morning, these two brothers heard the call of their Lord Jesus Christ and left home to study for the ministry at Christ Church College in Oxford. John was ordained a priest in the Anglican church in 1728 and Charles in 1735.

I'll let them tell you some of their story.

John Wesley: Although I am often credited with being the founder of the Methodist tradition, it was really you, Charles that gathered us together at Oxford when you began the Holy Club in 1729.

Charles Wesley: That was an important time for our spiritual growth. We were very methodical in our spiritual disciplines of prayer and bible study, fasting and Holy Communion. It was my hope that we could renew the beleaguered Church of England. The General Rules for Holy Club members were simply to avoid evil, to do good, and to employ the means of grace God gives for spiritual growth. We invited you to join us, John, and you became our unofficial leader.

John Wesley: People laughed at us. They called us the "The Reforming Club" and "Bible moths" and "Enthusiasts" and "Methodists." The latter name stuck. I didn't particularly like it, but I accepted it. Remember when we invited the entire The Holy Club to go with us as missionaries to Georgia in 1735? We assumed that the wild frontier across the Atlantic where colonists and Native Americans lived were just waiting for the "good news." Little did I know that it was I who was to be converted by the German Moravians who were on board the ship with us. In mid-Atlantic we got into a fierce storm. And while I panicked, the Moravians and their pastor were remarkably calm. At the height of the storm, they sang hymns. I still remember that great wave that broke over the ship. Everyone heard the mainsail mast split and crack. Falling gear was everywhere, planks were split, sailors and passengers alike were crying out – all except the Moravians – men, women and children, who looked up briefly and then continued with the singing of their Psalm. Yes, it is to our German friends that I owe a great deal for they taught me about the true meaning of faith and confidence in God in all circumstances.

Charles Wesley: I returned to England before you did. You can tell the rest of that story! On that disastrous return trip, I discovered that the Captain of the vessel on which I had booked the voyage was a drunken sailor. One night I even found him sprawled stark naked and dead drunk on the deck! The ship ran aground while sailing from Georgia up the coast and because of stormy weather, we had to take refuge in Boston for a few weeks. And that gave me the opportunity to preach at Old North Church in Boston. Even though I was a young Anglican priest, my sermon was the first “Methodist” preaching in New England.

John Wesley: Meanwhile, I stayed on in Georgia. Most people have heard about my exploits there. I fell in love with Sophie Hopkey, the 18 year old niece of the bailiff of Savannah. Things did NOT go well and to my distress, Sophie eloped with a rival suitor. I then refused to serve her Holy Communion, and was in turn sued for defamation of character by Sophie’s new husband. The furious turmoil created in the colony resulted in a formal grand jury indictment and the trial dragged on and on. After 6 months of harassment, I fled the colony for home!

Charles Wesley: Back home in England, both of us also had conversion experiences that changed our lives. Mine actually came a few days before yours. I was struggling with both physical and spiritual health at the time when on May 21, 1738 I heard a voice in the night saying “In the name of Jesus Christ, arise, and believe and be healed.” My health returned and until my death at age 81, I wrote hymns and served with you in creating spiritual homes for those yearning for a deeper relationship with God through Christ. You had your heart greatly warmed only three days later at a prayer meeting in Aldersgate Street where someone was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

John Wesley: Yes, I remember it well. It was a Wednesday evening, May 24, 1738 at about a quarter before nine and suddenly 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. So, as brothers and as brothers in Christ, you and I shared these life changing experiences and knew Christ’s call in our lives.

Charles Wesley: Our calling was to bring the good news to the poor, to heal the sick, to visit those in prison. We were inspired, like Jesus, to do most of our preaching in the fields.

John Wesley: Yes! the people to whom we brought God’s word would never be allowed to sit in the pews of a church. The men who brew the liquor are the one who sit proudly in their reserved pews but the poor miners and workers in the field get sucked into buying gin while their children go hungry. But now the poor hear the good news and are turning from drink! They are finding a new life in Christ.

Charles Wesley: We understand what it means to be poor. Mother, do you remember going to the archbishop to ask for money for food?

Susanna Wesley: Yes, it was an embarrassing time. We were so poor that I literally had to beg for food. And the archbishop had the gall to say to me, “Tell me, Mrs. Wesley, have you ever *really* wanted for bread?” And I looked him straight in the eye and said, “Strictly speaking, no. But, sometimes the agony of getting bread and paying for it has been the next degree of wretchedness to having none at all.”

John Wesley: I remember when our father was sent to debtors’ prison. We were not sure that he would ever get out. I was young, but I remember well what they did to poor people. Thousands of men, women and children were hung outside London for stealing a loaf of bread or a pair of shoes.

Charles Wesley: Yes, I can’t help thinking of our Lord, hanging on a cross, suffering just like the powerless of our day. It is these people that need to hear of God’s unconditional love and understanding. The women and children who are beaten senseless by drunk husbands, the hopeless drunks who think that they are condemned to hell – we have to tell them they are no less than children of God, called to love and be loved.

Susanna Wesley: You boys were true disciples of our Lord. You started orphanages and schools for poor children. You organized a weaving and knitting factory for the widows. You brought home remedies to the sick. And I helped the two of you put together a book to teach people how to be healthy.

Charles Wesley: One of my hymns was written to capture our understanding that we were called to bring good news and hope to the poor. Let me sing a verse for you. (sung to the tune “My Hope is Built” p. 368 UMH)

Thy mind throughout my life be shown, while listening to the sufferer’s cry,  
The widow’s and the orphan’s groan, on mercy’s wings I swiftly fly ,  
The poor and helpless to relieve, My life, my all, for them to give;  
My life, my all, for them to give.

John Wesley: Charles, your greatest gift was your prolific writing of hymns. Do you realize that you composed over 6,000 hymns in your lifetime? The Methodist revival was a singing revival; it was joy filled with music. It has been said that you could tell the houses of Methodists by the sound of singing. They sang at meetings, on the way to meetings, on the way home from meetings, at home, at work and at leisure. Among the favorites hymns are *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, *Jesus Lover of my Soul*, *Love Divine All Loves Excelling*, and *O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing*.

Charles Wesley: And your gifts, brother John, were many. You made it clear that faith is expressed in concrete acts of love. Faith is not simply belief, nor even the assurance of being forgiven. As it is noted in the Book of James, you, too preached that “Faith without works is dead.” The heart and the hand became symbols for the Methodist tradition.

You organized believers into societies and classes and people met weekly, between Sundays, to hold one another accountable for their spiritual disciplines. “How goes your soul?” was a question asked at the class meetings.

You also used lay people to bring the “good news” to the common folk. You even allowed women to preach which was unheard of in our day! At the time you had no intention of starting another church. You simply wanted to reform the Church of England and make it a church for all the people.

Susanna Wesley: Having left this amazing legacy, my beloved Charles died on March 29, 1788 at the age of 81 and John died 3 years later on March 2, 1791 at the age of almost 88. To this day, Christians are influenced by these brothers, their faithfulness and their lifelong response to God’s calling. Son John published a short pamphlet in 1742 titled *The Character of a Methodist*. Let me leave you with what he and Charles thought would be the marks of a Methodist life.

1. Methodists are “happy in God.” They rejoice because they find themselves in Christ. The Holy Spirit is present in their lives assuring them that they are children of God.
2. In everything Methodists give thanks, knowing that they can trust God in the most distressing and trying situations.
3. Methodists pray without ceasing.
4. As they love God, Methodists also love their neighbors. Their hearts are full of love for everyone. They love their enemies and this love is constant. It continues even when it is rejected by those who are loved.
5. Methodists are “pure in heart.” The love of God has purified their hearts “from all revengeful passions, from envy, malice and wrath and from every unkind attitude and feeling.”
6. A Methodist has one focus: doing God’s will.
7. Methodists avoid evil. They especially refrain from words and acts which might hurt others.
8. They do good to all – neighbors, strangers, friends and enemies.

John Wesley preached that we are all going on to perfection. May you pursue these Methodist qualities until you attain perfection!

(Materials for this sermon were taken from a number of sources: The United Methodist Web Site: The Women’s Division of the UMC; articles by Bishop Peter Weaver; Sermons on Our Wesleyan Heritage by Milo Thornerry; A Moment with John Wesley by J. Ann Craig; John and Charles Wesley, ed. Frank Whaling; John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler.)