

Stay in Love with God

(third of a three part series on *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*)

September 21, 2008 ~ 19th Sunday after Pentecost

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"NOTHING IS MORE PRACTICAL THAN FINDING GOD, THAT IS, THAN FALLING IN LOVE IN A QUITE ABSOLUTE FINAL WAY. WHAT YOU ARE IN LOVE WITH, WHAT SEIZES YOUR IMAGINATION, WILL AFFECT EVERYTHING.

IT WILL DECIDE WHAT WILL GET YOU OUT OF BED IN THE MORNING, WHAT YOU DO WITH YOUR EVENINGS, HOW YOU SPEND YOUR WEEKENDS, WHAT YOU READ, WHO YOU KNOW, WHAT BREAKS YOUR HEART, AND WHAT AMAZES YOU WITH JOY AND GRATITUDE.

FALL IN LOVE, STAY IN LOVE, AND IT WILL DECIDE EVERYTHING.

words of the late Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe

Colossians 2: 6 – 7

Since you have received Christ Jesus, live your whole life in our Savior. Send your roots deep and grow in Christ – firmly established in the faith you've been taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

John 21: 15 – 17

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

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Loving Teacher, come and make your home in our hearts this day. Dwell within us all day long and save us from error or foolish ways. Teach us today to do no harm, to do good, and assist us so that we may stay in loving relationship with you and our neighbor.

Help us today to be an answer to another's prayer so that we may be one of your signs of hope in the world you love. Amen. (*Three Simple Rules ~ A Wesleyan Way of Living*, Rueben Job, p. 69)

Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. These three simple rules give us a blueprint for living. Those were the rules that John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist tradition, espoused to his followers in the 18th century. These are the very rules that offer us a Wesleyan way of living in the 21st century.

We have spent the last two weeks pondering the first two rules. Do no harm. Do good. And we have reckoned with the fact that following these rules means living a counter-cultural, risk-taking life. It means choosing not only to do no harm to those whom we consider to be our enemy but more importantly to do good to those who do not fit our category of being "worthy" to receive any good. Doing no harm and doing good is a provocative way of living.

Reuben Job, in his brief commentary on these rules, points out the obvious.* Without the third rule, Staying in Love with God, the first two rules become impossible to carry out. “Staying in love with God is the foundation to all of life. It is in a vital relationship with God that we are enlivened, sustained, guided, called, sent, formed and transformed.” (p. 48, Job)

I think that there is a prior step to this third rule, because before we can Stay in Love with God we have to Fall in Love with God. Surely we all have had the experience of falling in love with another human being. There are as many ways of falling in love as there are people in the pews this Sunday. Each experience is unique. It can happen in an instant or it can grow out of a long time friendship. It can happen when we’re very young or when we’re very old. Falling in love opens up new possibilities as we experience the fullness of joy. And when that love is reciprocal, we feel beautiful from the inside out.

So it is when we fall in love with God. It can happen in an instant or it can grow out of a long time relationship with the One who is Holy. Falling in love with God can happen when we find ourselves surprised by abundance or when we find ourselves bereft and in need of solace and comfort. It can happen when we’re very young or when we’re very old. And it is always reciprocal. In fact, I believe that it is because of God’s unconditional love that we are drawn to fall in love with our Creator, our Redeemer and the Spirit that is in our every breath.

Do you remember when it was that you fell in love with God? I have a vivid memory of my own falling in love with Jesus. We had just moved to a new neighborhood when I was 7 years old. There was a Baptist Church nearby that offered a summer Vacation Bible School. It was during that week of learning about Jesus – his life, his death, his resurrection – that my life was touched by God’s love and I fell head over heels in love with Jesus. The “glow in the dark” cross that I received at the end of that week kept me safe through many a night. And although my theology and the symbols of my faith have evolved and changed over these years, I can never forget how it felt to know that God and I loved each other.

Do you remember when it was that you fell in love with God? Stories abound about this moment in people’s lives. Over the summer, I read the book, *Amazing Grace*, which had been recommended and loaned to me by Wilbur Cobb. It is the powerful biography of William Wilberforce, the British politician, philanthropist and leader of the movement to abolish the slave trade at the turn of the 19th century. What makes Wilberforce’s story so interesting is that it was the Wesley brothers and the early Methodist movement that was responsible for his “falling in love with God.”

When Wilberforce was sent to live with his aunt and uncle, his family hadn’t the slightest idea that they were sending the boy into a glowing hotbed of Methodism. Evangelicals, as the movement came to be called, were hated by the cultural and social elites of mid-eighteenth century England. The term of derision was “Methodists” or “enthusiasts.” (*Amazing Grace*, Eric Metaxas, p. 11) John Newton, the slave owner whose repentance was penned into the well known hymn *Amazing Grace* also had a great influence on Wilberforce. His personal acquaintance with these giants of the faith was, in good part, responsible for his conversion.

*I am grateful to Rueben Job for his book *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* which inspired this series and from which I quote extensively.

Upon his conversion at age 26, Wilberforce journals these words “Expect to hear myself now universally given to be a Methodist. May God grant it may be said with truth.” Shortly thereafter he received communion for the first time and he remarked that his experience “calls forth feelings in a supreme degree; a frame of united love and triumph well becomes it, and holy confidence and unrestrained affection.” William Wilberforce had fallen in love with God.

Once any of us falls in love with God then it is a matter of staying in love with God. How do we sustain that loving relationship? For John Wesley, for William Wilberforce, for you and for me it means attending to spiritual disciplines such as prayer and the reading of scripture, regular participation in worship and church fellowship, and doing acts of goodness and deeds of justice. Staying in love with God takes time, practice and commitment. How we choose to Stay in Love with God is our own personal choice and it varies considerably from person to person. What might work for one person would be unhelpful to another. But what we all share in common is that in order to Stay in Love with God we must be consistent in maintaining the relationship.

Again we all know that if we neglect the one that we love, soon the relationship is broken, trust fails and we find ourselves falling out of love. To be in relationship with another is to be invested in a work in progress. There are good times and there are not so good times. The tide ebbs and the tide flows but there is the constancy of the tide itself.

So it is to Stay in Love with God. It calls for commitment. It is a work in progress. It means finding the time to keep the relationship alive and well through the best and the worst of times. Jesus models for us the importance of staying close to God in order to fulfill what it is God calls him to do and be in this world. Jesus stayed connected, he stayed in touch, he stayed in love with his trusted Abba. He found not only his strength and guidance but his greatest joy in communion, in companionship with God. He taught us all by his prayer life how important it is to take time to be with God.

As a newly converted follower of Jesus, William Wilberforce took seriously his new relationship with God. He rose early each day to read the bible and pray. He kept a personal journal. He changed his habits of spending his money and his time and became generous in his philanthropy. From the time of his conversion, he was driven with a desire to promote Christianity and Christian ethics both in his private and public life. He worked to eradicate immorality and as a result was often distrusted and regarded with suspicion by many Tories.

So it is for all of us when we say yes to God’s call of love. We are released from a world of materialism and violence, from spending time and money on our personal wants. It appears that our current economic crisis might impose a lifestyle on all of us, similar to what Wilberforce chose for himself. We experience our freedom in Christ as a wonderful gift. But in that very freedom, we also are often led to places we had not intended to go. Our loyalty to Christ and to the way of Christ often calls us to action as we Stay in Love with God and seek to live a life of faithfulness, fidelity and integrity. Our lifestyles, our priorities, the choices we make often put us at odds with our family, our friends, our colleagues. Let’s face it, being a disciple means traveling the road less taken.

Look at what Staying in Love with God led William Wilberforce to do. In his journal he wrote “God almighty has set before me two great objects: the suppression of the Slave Trade and the reformation of manners.” Wilberforce’s conversion led him to abhor the way Africans were treated in the slave trade triangle. After a long and often nasty parliamentary campaign against the British slave trade, which included defeat after defeat over many decades, Wilberforce finally realized victory in 1807 with the passage of the Slave Trade Act.

In his later years, he supported the campaign for the complete abolition of slavery which eventually led to the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 which abolished slavery in most of the British Empire. Wilberforce died just three days after hearing that the passage of the Act through Parliament was assured.

During his years of arduous anti slave trade activities, he received the following letter from John Wesley who was 87 years old and only a few days from his own death when he wrote to Wilberforce these words:

“Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God....till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.

That God who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things, is the prayer of, dear sir, your affectionate servant, John Wesley” (p. 145, Metaxas)

Now, in addition to working to suppress the slave trade, Wilberforce also noted that he had been called by God to work for the reformation of “manners” or “morals” in British society. Because he was in love with God, Wilberforce championed causes and campaigns such as the Society for Suppression of Vice, British missionary work in India, the creation of a free colony in Sierra Leone, the foundation of the Church Mission Society and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He was often criticized for ignoring injustices at home while campaigning for the enslaved abroad.

“Do you love me?” Jesus asked Simon Peter. “Do you love me?” Jesus asks each one of us today. And if, like Peter, we say to Jesus, “Yes, Jesus, you know that I love you” then we, too, hear our Savior’s command to feed and tend all of God’s creatures and creation, doing no harm and doing good because we are in love with God. It is a costly way of living, in fact it demands our whole life, but as Jesus reminds us, we have to give up our life in order claim the abundant life of discipleship.

In the words of this morning’s anthem...

Demonstrate mercy, offer your hands,
This is what Jesus Christ commands.
Stay in love with God,
Love your neighbor as yourself;
Think on the things above
Stay in love with God.

So be it. Alleluia. Amen.