

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON from Aug 15: "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" -Psalm 150:6, Acts 2:5-12, John 10:27-30

This week's hymn is O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing. This hymn was written by one of the most prolific hymn writers in history, Charles Wesley. Being part of the Wesleyan tradition, it would be criminal not to include one of his works. Charles was the brother of John Wesley, who is considered the founder of Methodism. Raised in Anglican home with an Anglican priest as a father, the Wesleys were brought into the Christian faith early on. Their mother Susanna as widely understood to be primarily responsible for the spiritual upbringing, as dad was frequently away doing his ministry.

At University, the Wesleys joined with a few others to form a small group that sought to make their faith something more than the more passive sensibility it had come to entail in society and the church. They became very focused on accountability and meticulously keeping track of their spiritual disciplines and acts of service. So methodical were they that those around them began calling them "Methodists" as an insult. Rather than rejecting the label, they embraced it.

This more active faith that involved a personal devotion and participating in works of mercy in their community. For the Wesleys they were inseparable parts of the greater whole of a relationship with Jesus. One informed the other, and the notion is very much in keeping with the words of Christ, particularly in the gospel of John, as well as with Paul who followed his famous words in Ephesians that we are "saved by grace through faith, it is the gift of God, not through works" with "for this purpose you were saved, so that you could do the good works God prepared for you beforehand." The combination proved inspiring and their little group grew, and grew, and grew. In fact, today that small group has expanded to inform multiple traditions and is not ministering and serving globally.

John and Charles after a time ministering in England decided to take their efforts across the ocean to the colonies, specifically to Georgia. Put briefly, their efforts met with little success and even some embarrassment on John's part.

On the way back to England, a violent storm struck up and threatened to sink the ship they were on. Everyone, including the Wesleys was in a panic fearing for their lives. Everyone, that is, except a small band of German Christians known as the Moravians. The Moravians had begun a worship service, and were singing as the storm hit. While everyone else was freaking out, they simply continued singing. After the threat was past, the Wesleys asked this group if they were afraid. "Thank God, no" was the response. This was a turning point for the brothers.

They were faced with their own mortality, and had a stark realization that they hadn't the assurance of salvation they thought they had. The contrast of the response of the Moravians to their own threw them into their own personal crisis of faith. It also drove them to pursue their faith and look into the Moravian tradition, which became a great source of inspiration to them. Let me restate something key here. The Wesleys, who had been raised their entire lives in the Christian faith and begun and ministered in a reviving movement in the Anglican church, were doubting their own salvation.

Over time, they came each to have what is known as their Aldersgate experience. Attending a Moravian church service on Aldersgate Street, each said to have had the experience of their heart being "strangely warmed". This warming was the assurance that they were indeed redeemed. They didn't have to wring their hands over whether or not they would make heaven their home. This experience led them to a new freedom, boldness, and effectiveness in their ministry.

O For a Thousand Tongues was written by Charles Wesley on the 11th anniversary of this moment, which he considered his conversion. After ministering for his entire life to that point, it wasn't until then that he believed he was truly a convert to the faith. The opening line was inspired by the Moravian Peter Bohler who said in effect to Charles one day "were I to have a thousand tongues, I would praise God in each one."

This hymn and the sentiment that it conveys brings to mind a couple moments on the surface. Certainly in the scripture for this week it reminds us that everything has just reason to praise God. It also brings to mind the day of Pentecost. We see this moment when the Holy Spirit rested on the disciples in the upper room and they literally went out into the street to "proclaim their great redeemer's praise." All manner of nation was represented there and each heard their words in their native tongue. Quite literally many tongues singing praise.

There is another question that the back story of the hymn brings up for us as well. The Wesleys, ministering for years and raised in the faith, questioned their salvation. Can one minister, even effectively, and not be saved?

Not to be too direct, but the answer is yes. Jesus Himself acknowledges this in Matthew when he says that there will be many who will come to him bragging about all the things they did in His name, expecting to walk through the pearly gates, and He will respond "away with you, I never knew you." If nothing else, this response tells us that we must take our salvation with a healthy dose of humility.

Was this the Wesleys though? Not just because of my own Methodist leanings, but I would say no, it wasn't.

Yes, they had doubts, but consider the content of their lives. They clearly had a sense of connection to Jesus and His teachings. Leaps and bounds beyond those who only believed in a tacit acknowledgment of a creed or adherence to ritual as a saving relationship, they understood fully Jesus' words that belonging to Him is evidenced by the servant and sacrificial content of our lives. Might they have been trusting too much on those works to get in God's good graces? Perhaps. Even so, they were committed to engaging them because of their understanding of Jesus.

A second evidence is their response to their own crisis of faith. They didn't throw their hands up and say "well, we've been at it this long and clearly don't get it, might as well throw in the towel." Their experience drove them further into their faith and seeking of

Christ. They knew what they didn't have and pursued it until they received it. That isn't the evidence of shoddy faith. That is the evidence of faith that is growing.

This is truly the story of all of us. None of us ever truly "arrive". Instead our faith is a journey of growth day to day. We continue to deepen in connection and service. It is an adventure of sorts that is ever changing, transforming, and deepening us and our purpose as we go. All of it in pursuit of God and God's Kingdom both here and on the other side of the grave.

Understanding salvation in this light becomes so critical. Do fear, doubt, or wonder mean we aren't redeemed? Of course not! Fear is natural, particularly when faced with one's own mortality. If you've ever been driving and almost been run off the road by a tractor trailer you know this. That fear doesn't negate our salvation. Most people have seen or experienced the tragedy or unfairness of life and wondered how a loving God could exist in the presence of allowing these things to occur. This does not negate our salvation. None of us truly know what awaits us on the other side of the grave. Scripture gives illustrations, but they don't necessarily agree with one another. Questioning this does not negate our salvation. We take it on faith because the one constant in the hereafter is that there is something waiting for us, and it's either very good or very bad. We hope to enter the very good, and trust that we do that through Jesus Christ.

If you remember when we considered *It Is Well With My Soul*, it became evident that our brokenness, fear, and doubt don't necessarily negate our relationship with God through Jesus. In fact, it is that very relationship that is at our core, the bedrock of our faith, that allows the brokenness to exist in tension with the reality that it is well with our soul. At the baseline, at the very least, we know in whom we have placed our trust. That allows us to rest in that security even if our hearts and minds are amidst a storm.

What the Wesleys experienced on the other side of being assured of their salvation was freedom. Not freedom to complacency, but freedom to pursue their ministry and faith with even more passion and boldness. Their movement took on additional life as a result and continued to grow in influence and power.

This isn't unlike the post-crucifixion disciples. Immediately after they ran and hid. They wondered and doubted that Jesus was who they thought He was. He was dead. If they were His followers, were they going to be next? That fear was understandable, and maybe even wise. When Jesus returned, did he dismiss them for their fear? No! He pursued them, He found them, He comforted them, He commissioned them for the work to come.

Many times, while we can be too lenient with ourselves, we can also be too hard on ourselves. Many times God gives us more grace than we give ourselves. This is part of redemption. The very nature of the sacrificial redeemer is grace beyond measure. It is part and parcel to our scripture today where Jesus assures the disciples that when they have given themselves over to Him and He has claim on them, that no one can "snatch them out of His hand." We are secure in Him.

They too then experienced a new lease on life and ministry once they were assured. When they believed and trusted that Jesus had "gone to prepare a place for them" they went out in boldness to "proclaim their great redeemer's praise" and bring others to faith in Him as well. I'm sure they all experienced their share of fears and doubts along the way, but at their center they knew where they were bound and that made all the difference in the world. As we take heart and assurance in our salvation, there is one caution about how we proclaim it to the world.

There are many who are almost, or boldly even, boastful about their salvation. "I'm saved! Are you?" "I know where my soul is bound! Do you?" This can often be accompanied by a dismissive theology that if one doesn't accept my bold proclamation and then listen to why I'm so bold that I can then write them off because they've "had their chance" at salvation because of my attempt. For many, this kind of spirit is quite off putting and a barrier to hearing whatever message is being offered.

Along with this spirit, there may be the temptation to answer subsequent or otherwise questions about why one lives as they do with "because I'm a good Christian". After all, there are those "dos" and "don'ts" all Christians must follow right?

The other side is the many, whom I think are more correct, who might speak of their salvation thusly. "I know in whom I've put my faith, that's Jesus, but the decision isn't up to me, it's up to God. So if I'm saved, it is wholly by the grace of God and the grace of God alone." This is humility and puts the authority where it belongs, where it's always belonged, with God. I don't get to decide and so I trust in the grace of God revealed in scripture.

Along with this spirit the response to why one lives a certain way might be, "I see it this way, if I believe that God has redeemed me in the way that God has, there's only one response. I live my life in gratitude for that gift, and that looks like trying to live the life I have as correctly as I can before God." Notice the difference between the two. One is very self-centric, the other God-centric. Throughout scripture, God-centric has always been who and what we are called to be. No more is this true than how we view, understand, and share our salvation. The humble is no less confident, but it is more Biblically honest and compelling to one who doesn't yet believe.

In the service we offered people the opportunity to remember their baptism. This is a service of remembering the vows taken at or on our behalf at our baptism (those baptized as infants). It wasn't a "rebaptism". Hebrews tells us that Jesus died "once for all." As such, one baptism is fully sufficient. At different times in our lives, however, we may find it healing, refreshing, and renewing for our own journey to set a moment aside and remember those vows as a symbolic experience to recognize their place in our lives and be reminded of that promise. I'm reminded of couples who renew their wedding vows. They aren't "rewed", but they want that joyful moment for whatever reason, to return to that moment for its inspiration and power. Perhaps it's like those moments at work or in sports where the supervisor or coach reminds us to "get back to basics." We aren't "rehired" or "rejoining" the team. We're still at that we are, but we take a moment to remember those core values and commitments that began our journey, that were foundational, and to embrace them anew with vigor, purpose, and passion.

I encourage each of us to not forget where we came from. Rest assured in our salvation, yet at the same time never grow weary or complacent. To live faithfully, and humbly, inviting others by word and deed to embrace a faith that has empowered, encouraged, assured, and been healing in our own lives.