

The following comes from the transcript of the sermon. It may contain transcription errors.

Today we are beginning a new worship series, but it is going to touch on a theme that we have been following throughout the year — rooting ourselves in our Wesley heritage, our Wesleyan theology. We have talked some about the history of how the Wesleyan tradition began. We talked about some of the core ideas behind our theology, but today I want to touch on something that started setting the early Methodists apart.

One of the distinctions in how John Wesley did theology compared to many of his contemporaries — and many theologians still today — is that at his core, John Wesley was what we call a practical theologian. That means that John Wesley never sat down to write out his theology or to organize it in a way where we could point to a single place and say, "That is what Methodists believe about salvation" or "That is what John Wesley taught his followers to think about sin." Rather, John Wesley engaged in practical theology. His teachings came about through sermons, letters, and music, and it was developed as a living, breathing response to the world that he lived in. And that is how Methodists are still doing theology today — by discovering the holy presence of God in the midst of everyday life.

So for the next three Sundays, I want to explore something that was at the very core of the Wesley movement: the idea of holiness. And like I said, we don't have a systematic theology, so I can't point you to the doctrine of holiness. Rather, holiness is an idea built on practical theology. Holiness is how we live and breathe and respond to the movement of God's grace in our lives. Holiness is at the very core of what we mean when we call ours a living, breathing faith — a faith that is supposed to change heart and mind, but also a faith that is meant to engage our bodies and our spirit.

Holiness comes in two essential forms. There is personal holiness — those things we do mainly for ourselves that build us up in faith. And then there is social holiness — the way our faith manifests itself in how we live with our neighbors. And in my experience, churches tend to get really good at one or the other. Some churches become so good at personal holiness that they become very inward focused, and they start neglecting that ours is a social religion. Other churches get so outward focused that they don't spend the time invested in the transformation of the heart. Finding the balance between both allows both to grow together and stronger in ways that build up our own faithfulness but also build up our communities.

This week I want to spend a few moments talking about that personal holiness — that inner work of changing the heart that we go through.

Wesley on the Heart

When John Wesley was asked, "What is a Methodist?" he wrote that a Methodist was someone who had the love of God shed abroad in their heart, and that for a Methodist, God was the joy of the heart. Wesley came up in the Church of England during the Age of Reason. He would have been very aware that reason was becoming a buzzword in philosophical and theological circles, and reason played a big part in how Methodists did their theology. But as everyone else was talking about reason — about the reasonable person — John Wesley began talking about the heart.

You see, for John Wesley, our faith wasn't something that was necessarily something to think about. It was something to feel. Now, don't hear me say that Methodists aren't supposed to be a thinking people — just the opposite. But the thinking comes through the faith of the heart rather than the headwork of theology. At its essence, personal holiness is those things that we do inwardly that move us to be more Christlike: things like spending time in prayer, reading the scriptures, worshiping, giving of ourselves. Personal holiness at its core is about the work we do to become closer to God.

The Prophet Ezekiel and the Transformed Heart

In our readings today, we heard from the prophet Ezekiel. We heard about the prophecy of the transformed heart. Ezekiel is prophesying on the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming exile of the Jewish people to Babylon. He prophesies this devastation that will be coming — of a community that will be torn apart, of a land that will be left in ruin — and that after the hardship, after the sorrow, after the loss, after the grief, will come restoration.

Ezekiel shares the promise that the land will be restored, the ruins will be rebuilt, things will grow again in Zion. But for Ezekiel, the land isn't the important part of what is being restored. It is nice that the land, the cities, and all that will be restored. But for Ezekiel, what is important is the restoration of the heart of the people. And the heart of the people isn't just going to be restored — it is going to be fully replaced by God. Ezekiel offers the promise that the heart of stone is going to be replaced with a living heart.

And all of this is going to be in spite of the people's rebellious ways. It is going to be in spite of the people's sinful nature. It is going to be in spite of the fact that the people had turned their backs on God. God is still going to pour out love upon them. It is God's love for them — what we call God's grace — that is going to be poured back into their lives. They may go through hardship for a season. They may face devastation and destruction for a season. They may go through a time of great loss and hardship and pain. But God's love is still coming. God's love is always coming. God's love is persistently coming to them.

There is a core truth in what Ezekiel shares that is hard for some people. The core truth here is that the restoration work begins with God — not with us. We spend so much time trying to heal ourselves, help ourselves, restore ourselves, and fix ourselves that we might miss that the message of transformation always begins with God. It is an act of God's grace, God's love, that enters our lives and begins the work of restoration.

Here are some of the words from the prophet Ezekiel that were shared with us a moment ago: "I will take you. I will gather you. I will bring you. I will sprinkle water on you. I will remove that stony heart of yours." This is God's work. It is God's grace that reaches into our lives even in the hardest moment — even in the moment when we thought we were so far gone, how could God possibly still want anything to do with us? In those exact moments, God is still reaching out with God's love, just ready to love us fully. God is coming to us.

I try to imagine what the people of Jerusalem must have felt when they heard these prophecies of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a strange fellow — he did strange things as all the prophets do — but he is talking about the end of their way of life. And it must have felt like something eternal was coming to an end, something being ruined that wouldn't be able to be fixed again. And here is the revelation from God: that even when the people must have felt abandoned, lost, and wandering, the revelation is that God is still actively calling to them, inviting them to have a hope in the future.

I wonder how many times throughout history, right into the present day, we have had those same questions, those same worries — that something that seemed too important to fail was about to be crushed. And I wonder how many times we have needed to hear that same promise from Ezekiel: that God's love is still coming into our lives, no matter what happens in the world around us.

The Changed Heart in First Peter

Let me move to the letter of First Peter, because we heard that a moment ago too. For Peter, that new heart changed everything. When Peter received that new heart, everything in his life changed. It changes how we live. It changes how we love. The changed heart is what lets us love deeply. Peter says in 1 Peter 1:22 that it lets us love deeply — but another way to translate that would be to say that the transformed heart lets us love fervently.

I like that word "fervently" because it makes me think of an action. It makes me think of something that pushes through hardship to keep loving no matter what. You see, this isn't just love that the transformed heart is capable of — it is powerful and demanding, fervent love for one another. All those outward things that we do to love one another, all of that begins with the transforming of the heart.

And I think it is important that it begins there because it takes all the ego out of the room. It takes away all that self-interest. So often when we love, we love out of that place of feeling good about ourselves, or we love out of that space of "what's in it for me?" But when we love from the transformed heart — when we love from the abundance of God's love for us — it changes everything. When we love from our own limited reserves, it becomes so easy to start saying who it is we will love and who it is we won't. When we love from our own limited reserves, it becomes so easy to say, "I will love you, but I have a harder time loving you."

But when our love comes from the heart of God — when it comes from the very heart of God — how can that love be limited? How can love that comes from the very heart of God exclude one person and not another? If we love from the transformed heart, there is no grievance, no segregation, no separation that can get between us and loving one another as fervently as God has loved us.

Perfected in Love

Something that John Wesley talks about several times in his sermons and his notes is the idea that we can be perfected in this life. And when he talks about being perfected in this life, he is not talking about us perfectly knowing our church doctrines. He is not talking about us never making mistakes. He is not talking about us always knowing the exact right next thing to say or do. When he is talking about being perfected, he is talking about being perfected in love. For Wesley, perfection was all about how well we love one another and how well we love God.

Perfection is about loving God so much that it just begins to pour out of us in everything we do — not that we won't make mistakes, but that our lives will be so filled with love that it just becomes part of who we are. I think that is beautiful. I think that is a beautiful sentiment for the church — that we are a church that is not built on our strong theology. And as much as I hate to admit it, we are not a church built on a perfect governance structure. We are a church that is founded on the idea that through the grace of God, we can learn to love one another as God has loved us. We are a church that can glimpse into the very heart of God and see the world through that lens of God's perfect, transforming love — where everyone is fully invited, everyone is fully loved, and everyone is perfectly welcome.

Unleashing Fervent Love on the World

I want to circle back to that prophecy from Ezekiel. He says something that I think is really important for us to hear this morning. Ezekiel shares the word of God that says the places of devastation — the towns, the cities, the fields which had been left in ruin — will be

rebuilt. But it wasn't just about being rebuilt so people could move back in. That wasn't why God was doing the restoration work of Israel. God was doing it so that the world might see the work God does in our lives to change our hearts, to rebuild our ruin. It is not just for us. It is not just so we can have that warm, cuddly feeling. The work God does in us is supposed to be transformative for the world. The changed life, the transformed church — it is supposed to be a blessing for the world. It is supposed to teach us to fervently love all the world as God has loved us.

You see, personal holiness is not about trying harder to get right with God. It is about trying harder to let God in and let God do the work through our lives. To let God transform our hearts and to let God work with us to imagine how we might unleash perfected, fervent love on the world. What a magnificent invitation for the church today — to unleash perfected, fervent love in our communities, in our neighborhoods, and upon a world that needs to see it.

Closing Prayer

Holy One, it has been hard. We have lived the devastation. We know what the ruin looks like. We have seen cities leveled in war. We have seen communities devastated by pandemics. We know the famine that has left hunger in the bellies of billions. We know the devastation. We know the trumpeting that comes from the high places, and we know the cries that come from the low. Lord, let our church, let our lives be that visible symbol of transformation — that pours love into the devastated places, that pours love into the ruins and the brokenness — that the work of healing, the work of restoration, the work of reconciliation may begin. May it begin in our transformed hearts, that the world may see. In Christ I pray. Amen.