

“The Heart of the Matter”

Date: Feb. 18, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Texts:** Luke 6:43-45; Ezekiel 36:26 **Occasion:** “A Disciple’s Heart” series, Lent 1 **Themes:** Discipleship; Sanctification; Lent

Have you ever felt as if you were the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*? The one thing he needed was a new heart. John Wesley would affirm the gospel message and say that is true of all of us: we need a new heart. On Ash Wednesday we prayed Psalm 51, a part of which says, “Create in me a clean heart, O God and put a new and right spirit within me.” (Ps 51:10)

Today we begin a new sermon series, and tomorrow a new study group on Monday nights. If we could squeeze the central message of this study into one sentence it would be this: “The heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart.” In the Wesleyan tradition we place a strong emphasis on *the transformed heart*.

Unlike some other traditions that put the emphasis on right beliefs, the Wesleyan tradition finds its center in the transformed heart, as the love of God *redirects* our passions, *restores* our relationships with God and with others, and *reshapes* our lives into the likeness of Jesus.

That is, of course, where the Wesleyan revival in England began. On the evening of May 24, 1738, a stuffy, well-educated, deeply devoted but spiritually hungry Anglican priest by the name of John Wesley went reluctantly to a small group Bible study in Aldersgate Street in London.

He wrote in his journal: “I felt my heart strangely warmed.” The faith he had studied, believed and taught with his head became a transforming fire in his heart. It’s not as if Wesley was making this stuff up. He found the idea of the transformed heart deeply rooted in Scripture and the Christian tradition.

He heard it in God's promise to the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one." (Ez. 36:26)

He learned it from Jesus, who told his followers, "The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks." (Luke 6:45 NRSV)

Wesley prayed it regularly in worship using the words of *the Book of Common Prayer*, a prayer that you and I have said in this church: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord."

The word *heart* appears over 900 times in *the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. You might even describe the Bible as a divinely inspired, spiritual electrocardiogram in which the heart is understood as the life-giving core of our being.

It is the inner source of our energy and direction. It is the "mission-control center" that determines our desires, fires our passions, frames our values, and energizes our will. That's why the Old Testament writer instructs: "keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flows the springs of life." (Proverbs 4:23)

Wesley also understood that God's heart-transforming work is not a static or stationary thing. We do not "get saved" and then sit around waiting to go to Heaven. Discipleship in the Methodist tradition is always going somewhere. Salvation is a *lifelong* journey of heart transformation, by which the Spirit of God is at work to form people who love God with our

whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and who love others as we have been loved by God.

Wesley called this process of heart transformation “Christian perfection,” or “being made perfect in love.” He saw it as God’s mission for the early Methodists. He called them to a methodical practice of spiritual disciplines and service through which the Spirit of God would be at work in people’s lives, to restore the image of God within.

Wesley commanded us to make disciples. And when local congregations are energetically engaged in that mission, lives are being transformed. But this doesn’t just happen. It takes intentional, methodical practice. Wesley expressed a concern that still resonates today. He said:

“I am not afraid that the people called Methodist should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast the doctrine, spirit and discipline with which they first set out.”

Our hope is that this sermon series and study group will draw the people called Methodists into a methodical practice of their faith that allows God to transform hearts, build community and transform the world. This method builds on the approach we first learned about when we did the study, “A Disciple’s Path,” which is the program we now use with all of our new member classes.

So we will be reminded of the spiritual disciplines to which we are all called: Prayer; Scripture Meditation; Financial Generosity; Invitational Evangelism; Small Group Community; Corporate Worship; and Gift-Based Service. All of us are already practicing these disciplines to one degree or another. We are invited to move to a new level, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Now notice, we are all at different places on the spiritual journey. Some of us are merely *strangers* to Jesus – we may not even be certain that we believe in God. Others are *acquaintances* with Jesus, but still exploring. Their faith is not yet a significant part of their life. For some, they *are* friends of Jesus. They participate in the life of the church and they are working on what it means to follow Jesus.

For some, they are *good* friends of Jesus. Their relationship with Jesus makes a huge difference in their lives, and they are discovering, almost on a daily basis how their life can help to make God's love real in the world. For a few, they are *intimate* friends of Jesus. Following Jesus is the most important thing in their life. They see their own life as part of God's transformation of the world.

How is it with your heart? And at this point I'm not talking about your blood pressure reading, or whether you need a heart catheterization. How is your spiritual heart? Or let me ask it this way: how is it with your soul? Are you on fire for God? Or has your love for the Lord grown lukewarm? Are you passionately following Jesus, or merely casually going through the motions of religion?

John Wesley urges us to go on to perfection. By that he did not mean we would never make another mistake in our life, but rather that we would be totally in love with God, and God's love would consume and rule our hearts.

In the coming weeks we will be learning and then putting into practice those disciplines which will allow the Holy Spirit to do a new work in each of our hearts. However, please remember that being made perfect in love is not a "pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps" project.

John Wesley would want us to be clear, that is always and *only* a work of God's grace in the human heart, through the power of the Holy

Spirit. It is a work of the Spirit, but one in which we are *active* participants, not passive observers.

In the words of the Apostle Paul, we are called to “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in us, enabling us to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:12-13)

I hope that during this Lent, you will actively use the various spiritual disciplines that are offered through Lakewood United Methodist church. I hope that you will choose to worship regularly, that you will be a part of our study group on Monday night, or some other small group.

I hope that you will take and use our Lenten devotionals. And I pray that you will open your heart to the work of God’s Holy Spirit to transform you heart. These words from one of Charles Wesley’s best-loved hymns describe the end-goal of our discipleship. May they become your personal prayer, as you commit yourself to pursuing a disciple’s heart:

Finish, then, thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in Heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,

Lost in wonder, love and praise. Amen. (UM Hymnal, p. 384, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”)

This sermon borrows heavily from the daily workbook, leader’s guide and companion reader of the book *A Disciple’s Heart: Growing in Love and Grace*, by James A. Harnish with Justin Larosa. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, “The Introduction.”