

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson  
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant  
8<sup>th</sup> March 2009  
Evensong in Honor of John and Charles Wesley  
Luke 9:2-6

Tonight we offer our Evensong in honor of John and Charles Wesley, Eighteenth Century renewers of the Church. They were born in 1703 and 1707, and became leaders of the evangelical revival in the Church of England. They both attended Oxford University, and there they gathered a few friends with whom they undertook a strict schedule of worship and discipline of the Book of Common Prayer, from which they received the nickname, "Methodists." They were ordained priests of the Church of England, and they spent a few not very happy years in America. When they returned to England, they each experienced deep conversion experiences within three days of each other. It was this deep emotional awareness of the love of Christ, freely forgiving John's sins and granting him eternal life, that inspired them both to stir up in others a similar awareness of and response to the saving love of God.

Early Methodist meetings were often led by lay preachers with very limited education. On one occasion, such a preacher took as his text Luke 19:21: "Lord, I feared thee, because thou art an austere man." Unfortunately, the preacher was unfamiliar with the word "austere." And so he preached on "an oyster man," likening the diver who plunges into the depths of bone-chilling water, cutting his hands on the sharp edges of the shells, surfacing and gasping for air to Christ, who descended from the glory of heaven into the squalor of earth in order to retrieve humans and bring them back up with him to the same glory. Not bad! Twelve men were converted that evening! Afterwards, someone complained to Wesley about the preacher's lack of education - John Wesley simply replied, "Never mind, the Lord got a dozen oysters thaty night."

Charles was the hymn-writer of the family - he wrote over *six thousand* hymns, including about six hundred for the Eucharist alone! We'll be singing one of the world's favorites at Easter - the familiar "Christ the Lord is risen today."

Although the Church of England frowned on emotional religious response - sounds like our familiar "chosen frozen," doesn't it? - it was the intention of the Wesleys that their Methodist societies should be a group within the structure of the Church of England, but after their deaths in 1788 and 1791 the societies in America and England developed their own structures and status.

It seems to me that John and Charles exemplify the admonition of Jesus in tonight's Gospel lesson: he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. Jesus didn't send the disciples out to perform miracles or to tell fortunes - no, he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God. And that is what John and Charles did, and they, in turn, sent out others - including our famous oyster man.

And in doing so they personified this thought: The Gospel is meant to be shared.

The Good News of God's redeeming love is not supposed to be some sort of private belief, because it is good news for the world! We're not supposed to hold it tight in our own community, we are supposed to *spread* the Gospel. We're supposed to be evangelists, messengers of good news – oh, my gosh, we're supposed to *evangelize!*

How very scary for Episcopalians.

Well, I can't help it; it's what Jesus told us to do.

I find it somewhat odd that we don't have a lot of problems with *other* things Jesus told us to do. Many of us work in soup kitchens, feeding the hungry. There's a number of people who visit prisons, freeing the prisoners of their isolation – and there's a number of people who work for causes of justice, bringing *real* freedom to the oppressed and the marginalized. Some of us contribute our time, talent, and treasure to social agencies that assist the poor. The list goes on – I could easily pull two dozen of these people out of our own congregation without even blinking an eye.

But *evangelize!!! ME!!!* You've got to be kidding. That's for Baptists. Methodists. Those Community Church people.

Why is it so darned scary?!? What keeps us from proclaiming our faith in public? What prevents us from talking about church to neighbors and strangers? It's not a taboo – there are evangelicals all over this country and right here in Mount Pleasant who will be happy to do it. Mormon missionaries – *kids the age of our choral scholars* – give up a year of their lives to evangelize. But Episcopalians?

Well, we're sort of quiet about our evangelism. There are terrific exceptions, of course, but in general Episcopalians are of the opinion that if we build a church they will come – we're reluctant to say, "Here, let me open the door for you."

I suspect we all could use an infusion of Wesley blood. In a church that proclaims "All Are Welcome" and whine to each other (yes, to each other, as if this would help) about declining church membership in America (we don't specify our own denomination, of course) Episcopalians (and I realize that some of you are *not* of the one true faith!) are the *quietest* evangelists around! Well, perhaps not including our Quaker friends...

I challenge you: The next time someone says "How was your weekend," talk about your church experience. Yes, *talk about your church experience*. Then ask them if they'd like to join you next Sunday – don't suggest some vague time in the future, give them a date! Let some of the Wesley blood that flows through the Anglican Communion inspire you!

Now this morning I mentioned Samuel Sebastian Wesley, and I said that he was a naughty boy. Actually, I must correct myself.

In 1817, Sarah Wesley wrote this in a letter:

“...he will remain with his unprincipled Mother to be trained up with the Vicious, and incorporated with the Vulgar...We would have rescued this poor Boy, and given him a chance of becoming a good Member of Society.”

She was talking about Samuel Sebastian, her seven-year old nephew, grandson of Charles and great-nephew of John, the first of seven children of an irregular union between the renowned organist and composer Samuel Wesley and his housemaid Sarah Suter. It wasn't that he had simply been born out of wedlock – no, Sarah's real complaint was that Samuel Sebastian's mother had lured his father away from his wife and lawful family.

Much to her later surprise, Samuel Sebastian's determination and talent led “this poor Boy” to the top of his profession and official recognition with the offer of a knighthood. He had become the foremost church musician of his generation.

So much for the power of God's grace.

The Wesley family has given the church inspiration in music and spoken word. Their enthusiasm has blessed the church and Christianity at large.

And the evangelist in all of us owes a debt to John and Charles in particular – may we repay that debt by becoming evangelists ourselves.

Amen.