

WGUMC October 22, 2017 "Wrestling with Wesley"  
Genesis 32:22-31

The story about Jacob wrestling with God on the shores of the River Jabbok is a story for the ages, especially this age. Some of us have spent years wrestling with God or the idea of God or our faith in God. And Jacob appeals to us even though he's a feisty character who was trying to beat God into giving him a blessing! We, too, want to know who God is and what God can do for us.

This fight scene comes in the middle of a long drama in the Book of Genesis about two twin brothers, Jacob and Esau. Years ago, Jacob stole his brother's birthright and left town. After years of living in exile, he heads back home and Esau comes to meet him. Jacob is understandably worried that Esau will try to kill him. So he sends his family on ahead (!) and through the night keeps vigil by the river.

That's when God suddenly appears in the form of a man and the two begin to wrestle. Just as Jacob is getting the

upper hand, he asks the man for his name. Now in the ancient world, to give someone your name was to give them a certain power over you, a certain claim on you. And that is something the God-man refuses to do. "Why is it that you ask my name?" is all he will say before he blesses Jacob and goes his way.

The moral of the story is that we can wrestle with God all we want, but in the end we don't have power over God. Even if we see God face to face, we still have to know our place. Jacob got the blessing, but he did not get the name, which just goes to show you that there are some things we can't know about God, that there is something irreducibly mysterious about the divine presence in the world and in our lives.

I'm afraid that some of the folks who followed Luther and Calvin and those other early reformers forgot about that. When you are always arguing about who God is and what God wants you don't like mysteries. If your side is going to win, then you need certainty.

So the different Protestant factions tried to corral God. By writing creeds and confessions, they drew boundaries around their belief and tried to keep out all who disagreed.

The fatal mistake was when they looked to secular powers to police those boundaries. When the Protestant churches became an arm of the state in Germany, Switzerland and England, the reformation was all but over.

By the eighteenth century, England had had a state church for almost two hundred years. Every English citizen was born into it, but ordinary people seldom attended it. Even the clergy who were paid by the king to serve a local parish often didn't live anywhere near it.

The industrial revolution was getting underway. People were moving from farms into mines and factories. They could no longer make a living on the land and so they had to leave their extended family and their history and make their way to a strange city. Like globalization today, industrialization caused a

huge amount of social upheaval. People felt dislocated and disconnected and disoriented and their souls were deeply distressed.

Into this time of social anxiety and spiritual deformation walks John Wesley. A lot of you know his story, about his pious mother and his song-writing brother. You may know about the holy club when he was a student at Oxford, and his missionary misadventures in Georgia, how he came home a failure and fell into despair.

Wesley had the right breeding, had gone to the right schools, read all the right books, prayed all the right prayers, tried to do all the right things, but his heart was not right with God. Even though he was duly ordained in the Church of England, he came home from the Georgia Colony doubting whether he had any true faith at all. He confessed to a friend, Peter Böhler, that he was thinking of giving up his collar. Böhler

told him, "Preach faith until you have faith," which is the eighteenth-century version of "fake it 'til you make it."

A few weeks ago, I read to you what happened one evening when Wesley went to a Bible study on Aldersgate Street in London. When he was listening to someone read about the free grace of God from Martin Luther's commentary on the Book of Romans, Wesley's heart was, in his words, "strangely warmed." Now we Methodists are so familiar with that story that we make lame jokes about it, so that we can avoid taking a serious look at it.

Today, I want to take a look at John Wesley's contribution to the Protestant Reformation, his "heart religion." Now I used to think that it was all about feeling something, but heart religion isn't just about emotions. When the writers of the Bible use the term "heart" they usually are talking about the whole person. "Heart" includes feelings, but it is much more than that. Ancient people didn't divide the head from the heart or reason

from emotion the way we do. For them, your heart contains all of you: your knowledge, your understanding and your will, along with your feelings. When the Gospel says that you must love God with all your heart [Matthew 22:37], it means that you must love God with your thoughts, your dreams, your desires, your intentions, your decisions, and your emotions.

So Wesley wasn't just responding emotionally to the Bible study. It wasn't that he was caught up in the "heat of the moment" as we would say. What Wesley was caught up in was the saving grace of God. And that encounter didn't just change his feelings. Whether he knew it at the time or not, it changed his whole being. When Wesley's heart was strangely warmed, his whole life was being transformed.

Wesley would later call this transformation "new birth" because it is a time when our spiritual senses come alive, just as our physical ones did when we were born. Just as it was back then, everything is a bit blurry at first, but over time we

begin to see what God wants us to see and to hear what God wants us to hear. Gradually, we become aware of a different reality and a different power at work in the world because that power is also working in us. That power is God's "pure Universal Love." It isn't a feeling that comes and goes. It's a power that not only warms the heart but changes the world.

It changed Wesley's world. He proved that you don't have to know everything about God to know God. You don't have to have power over God to experience the power of God. You don't have to read all the right books to have a right relationship with God. Wesley said that Christians can differ about many things. It is not what's in our heads, but what's in our hearts that matters to God. Wesley would say, "If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand." [Sermon: "The Catholic Spirit"]

If we want to see a change in our hearts, much less a change in the world, we have to have patience. In the days

immediately following his heart-strangely-warmed experience, Wesley wrestled with what to make of it in his journal. He was worried because he had assumed that when he received an assurance of salvation, he would be happy, but he wasn't feeling any joy. As the days went on, fear and doubt crept in. But so did peace and love and joy, enough to fuel what has been one of the longest-running revivals of faith and hope the Church has ever seen. Over 50 million people today practice John Wesley's heart religion even if they have never heard of him.

Wesley kept a journal because the spiritual life is a journey, and you might never see your progress if you don't do a regular check-in. If we don't keep a meticulous journal, how can we know if we are still on the journey? If God's love isn't just a feeling, how do we know if our heart, our inner person, is still warm or if it has grown cold? It would be nice if God would call

us every day and tell us, "you're getting warmer" or "you're getting colder."

Going to a class meeting was the way Wesley and his followers took their spiritual temperature, but we don't do weekly class meetings anymore. Most of us don't have a small group that meets regularly to inquire into the state of our soul. We're busy. Our lives are full of stress, and our spiritual health declines at the same rate that our physical and mental health decline. Sometimes, we just have to make the time we don't have to come to a full stop so we can take stock. That's what happened for nine women and my husband Friday and Saturday at our fall retreat at Woodhaven.

Deb St. Julien is a nurse practitioner who got some training in different meditative practices so she could teach others how to reduce their stress and how to increase their physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Deb spent ten hours

teaching us ways to discern whether we are getting warmer or colder, closer to God or farther away.

It was interesting to me to discover as we did the deep breathing and relaxation exercises that not only did my body start feeling warmer (as my muscles relaxed and the blood began to flow), but my heart was feeling warmer, too. That's what happens when you take the time to breathe deeply and give the Spirit an opportunity. Like any exercise to improve your physical health, you have to practice it if you want to see some benefits for your spiritual health. The more regularly you let yourself relax into God's presence, the more you will notice the love and mercy of Christ flowing through you and the warmer your heart will be. And as Wesley showed us, the warmer your heart, the better the world.

A strangely warmed heart is not a passing thing. It's a practice. You don't have to be a Wesley nerd to know it. You don't have to be a touchy-feely person to experience it. But

you better be ready to be changed by it. After Jacob wrestled with God on the bank of the river, he went away limping. His encounter with God left an indelible mark on his life. Wesley's struggle with God did, too. So this is my question for you: have you wrestled with God in your life? Are you limping with the love of God? If God has ever warmed your heart, how has that changed your world? And if God has never warmed your heart, what are you waiting for?