# “Grow Deeply”

A Sermon on Spiritual Practices for the Wesleyan Rooted Worship Series

Psalm 119:97-112; Ephesians 3:14-19

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As the United Methodist Church, being “methodical” is literally our middle name. The term originated as an insult, hurled toward a small group of Christians founded by Charles Wesley and three others when they were students in Oxford, England in 1729. That group was called the Holy Club, and by the time John Wesley joined the group, the club gained a reputation for their rigorous and rigid observance of spiritual practices. They observed communion, translated New Testament Greek, visited the sick and imprisoned, all with great regularity. At first, they met only twice a week, and then it turned into every day, every evening from 6-9pm.

Outsiders mocked them for being methodical, and John Wesley took that as an insult. He thought that being called methodist meant being associated with the Roman emperor Nero, whose attending physician prescribed a rigid, inflexible regiment of diet and exercise. Wesley didn’t want any label that would be associated with such a pagan tyrant.

And that wasn’t the only nickname the club was getting thrown at it. Others were calling this pious group of college students the Supererogation Men, the Godly Men, the Sacramentarians, the Enthusiasts, and my favorite, “The Bible Moths.” That’s right, as in the blind bugs that fly into light bulbs.

Our denomination could have been called the United Bible Moths Church. Or Maybe United Mothodists, for short.

But it was Charles Wesley, the founder of that club, who talked his brother down from his frustration and convinced him that the term “Methodist” was not such a bad label after all. And maybe, they could redeem it and turn it into something positive. To be a Methodist meant to take the practices of the Christian faith seriously. To be diligent in worship, in small groups, in serving others, in financial giving, in reading scripture, in invitation, and in prayer.

By doing so, a person could grow in their love for God and their neighbor (in the words of Jesus) and so that the love of God could be shed abroad in their hearts (in the words of John Wesley). By tending to our spiritual practices, we can grow deeply in the love of God, which was Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesians:

*“That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”* (Ephesians 3:17)

And it is a sentiment echoed by the psalmist.

Psalm 119 is filled with the passion and devotion of a person who took seriously the spiritual practice of reading and applying the scriptures:

*Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me. I do not turn away from your ordinances, for you have taught me. I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.*

And it includes verse 100: *I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.*

The psalmist describes a life that is methodical, intentional, and regular, in reading the scriptures, keeping the commandments, and performing the practices that God requires of him.

In other words, the psalmist was acting like a Methodist.

But here’s an important reminder. For John and Charles Wesley and the early founders of Methodism, the point of keeping all these spiritual practices was not just for the sake of ticking off a checklist and filling your time with pious good deeds. Spiritual practices are not the ends, in and of themselves.

In fact, during the time of the Holy Club, they were by far not the only group that emphasized keeping spiritual disciplines. But there were two distinguishing features of early Methodism:

* One was its attentiveness to the sick and the poor.
* The other was the notion that these outward and visible practices were only effective if they transformed your inward self.

It wasn’t enough just to methodically check off your spiritual practice boxes for the day. They had to lead you to an inward place of love for God and love for all people.

Outward practices should lead to inward holiness.

John Wesley was often guided by these words by the great theologian Thomas à Kempis: “I take religion to be not the bare saying over so many prayers, morning and evening, public and private; not anything superimposed – added now and then to a careless worldly life; but a constant ruling habit of the soul; a renewal of our minds in the image of God. A recovery of the divine likeness; a still increasing conformity of heart and life to the patter of our most holy Redeemer.”

This is what led John and Charles Wesley to be so zealous about their spiritual practices, and this is what ultimately led them to embrace the pejorative Methodist label. Because they knew that practices were only a means to an end, which again, in the words of Paul to the Ephesians, was to be rooted and grounded in love.

And ironically, it’s a concept that John Wesley would very nearly forget, and it almost led him to walk away from the church just ten years after joining that Oxford Holy Club.

In 1735, shortly after the death of their father Samuel, John and Charles left for a mission trip in America, where they would spend two years and four months preaching the gospel to the early residents and settlers in what is now our state of Georgia. It was an eventful 28-months for all the wrong reasons. On the outbound ship on the Atlantic, a vicious storm nearly broke the boat apart, terrifying John Wesley. He realized how fearful he was of death, in contrast to the peace and calm of some Moravian Christians onboard who seemed to have a stronger faith than he did. The time in Georgia came and went with very little evidence of success. By the end of his time there, John Wesley headed back to England demoralized and in disbelief. Literally. He found himself on the verge of profound doubt in himself and in his faith in God.

On January 24, 1738, on the ship back to England, Wesley wrote this in his journal: "I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! Who shall convert me! Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief? I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near: but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, To die is gain!”

That same month, in his journal, Wesley wrote these words:

“By the most infallible of proofs, inward feeling, I am convinced: 1. "Of unbelief, having no such faith in Christ, as will prevent my heart from being troubled; which it could not be, if I believed in God, and rightly believed also in him.”

It is a long, raw, and revealing journal entry. Not even the great John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, was immune from periods of doubt and struggles with his faith. Even he had stretches where his faith felt weak, despite the fact that he approached the faith with such intentionality and devotion and commitment in his practices.

In other words, you and I can relate to moments like what he went through.

Which brings us to a grand moment of revelation for Wesley, and the real value of what it means to be Methodical in our faith, and to grow deeply by being diligent in our practices.

Just a few weeks after Wesley returned to England and wrote those words in his journal, he met a man named Peter Boehler. Wesley would later say that meeting Boehler would be “a day much to be remembered,” because meeting him would change Wesley’s life. Boehler was a German bishop in the Moravian church, of the same Moravians who impressed Wesley with their faithful calm amid that storm.

Wesley confessed to Peter Boehler how much he was struggling with his faith and his doubts. He was set to preach the next day and told Boehler that he was “clearly convinced of unbelief,” and was tempted to not preach tomorrow. He wondered in his journal how he could “preach to others when he had not faith himself?” He asked Boehler whether he should not preach, and Boehler said he should.

Wesley asked him, “But what can I preach?” Boehler replied, “Preach faith till you have it, and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.”

To put it in lay person’s terms, practice the faith until you have it. Then because you have it, you will practice faith.

That nugget of insight reminded Wesley of the real importance of spiritual practices and good deeds. We don’t do spiritual practices in order to be saved. We do spiritual practices because we are saved by faith. And then we do spiritual practices to be strengthened in our faith.

If you are in a place in your life where you feel like your faith is weak, or you are unsteadied by doubts or disbelief, then practice the faith until your faith is strong. And then then you can practice the faith because your faith is strong.

That insight would give John Wesley the courage and strength to go one, one day at a time, one faithful step and spiritual practice at a time, until two months later, on May 24, 1738, John Wesley walked into an evening meeting of Christians on Aldersgate Street in London. And there, after hearing a sermon based on Martin Luther’s preface to the book of Romans, a wave of clarity would settle into his spirit, his doubts would dissipate, and he would experience the famous moment when his heart was strangely warmed. All because he did not give up when he felt his doubt. He continued to practice the faith until he had a strong faith.

By the way, years later, Wesley would read the same words of one of our scripture readings today. From Psalm 119:97-112. And when he got to the words of verse 100: “I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts,” he would write these words as commentary: “The practice of religion is the best way to understand it.”

The practice of religion is the best way to understand it.

Friends, when we talk about our spiritual practices as United Methodists, and the disciplines of worship, small groups, service, financial generosity, reading scripture, invitation, and prayer – we don’t do these things simply because it is some checklist for self-congratulatory holiness. We encourage each other to follow these practices because we all have moments when our faith needs to be strengthened. Some of you may be going through such a stretch right now.

So, to be Methodist, in the most basic sense of the word, means to keep practicing until your faith is strong, so that you can practice because your faith is strong. In the words of Paul, it is so that you can be rooted and grounded in love.

And because, in the words of John Wesley, in Psalm 119:100, “The practice of religion is the best way to understand it.”

In the name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, Amen.

Excerpt from Wesley’s Journal:

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N22587.0001.001/1:12?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

Wesley’s Commentary on Psalm 119:

<https://biblehub.com/commentaries/wes/psalms/119.htm>