

“Wesleyan Vile-tality: A Call to Reclaim Our Wesleyan Heritage”

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[slide 1] Greetings, Arkansas United Methodists! Thank you Bishop Merrill, for the invitation to speak with you today not only about the ministry of GCAH but more importantly about how in this particular moment we need a better understanding of our past in order to envision our future as United Methodists. I have twenty-five minutes this morning and by minute 20 I hope to have all of you on board towards a reclamation of what I’m calling *Wesleyan vile-tality*.

Ya’ll, if we want to vital again as The United Methodist Church we have to reclaim our heritage and in order to reclaim it we have to take a deeper dive into what it truly was – a tradition of bending the rules, of being ridiculed, or doing the unthinkable, all in order to spread the love of God to as many people as possible.

Susanna

[slide 2]

Now y’all, any good history starts with the stories of and voices of women....any proper Methodist history should start with Susanna Wesley. The mother of John, Susanna was formidable. Quite famously, Susanna taught her daughters to read before she taught how to sew. Of this abnormal act, she wrote: “the putting children to learn sewing before they can read perfectly is the very reason why so few women can read fit to be heard, and never to be well understood.”

The most illustrative story of her strong will took place in 1712. Samuel had to travel to London to fulfill his duties as a priest and attend a Convocation (like y’all are attending annual conference right now). He left his curate, Inman, in charge of his parish, St. Andrews. Susanna believed Inman to be a buffoon at best. In order to ensure the spiritual care of Epworth, she began to invite friends, servants, and her children to hear her preach after the Sunday service in her home.

From her kitchen, she was soon preaching to over two-hundred people each Sunday. Inman was quite insulted by this and wrote to Samuel, whom then wrote to Susanna and inquired...an inquiry which Susanna dared to challenge. She insinuated that she would only cease preaching if Samuel, “command me to desist.” ...Samuel knew better than this.

John

John Wesley was about 8 or 9 years old when he saw his mother preach to hundreds. From his mother’s example, he realized that to truly reach people, sometimes you have to bend some rules and welcome people into the love of God...and sometimes this calls for unsanctioned actions outside the walls of the church. It is in, from, and through Susann’s influence that John begins to claim a sense of what I’m calling, Wesleyan vile-tality.

[slide 3] It is that willingness to look beyond today’s acceptable practices, standards, and norms and bend the rules in order to ensure that more and more persons can be included within the Kin-dom and that all persons, no matter who they are, how they identify, whom they love, or how they live can know and experience the love of God, can know their own self-worth, and can then grow to love themselves and others. Susanna preached a prophetic offense by simply embodying a female body and daring to preach in her own home. But she did so because she knew that there were persons in needs of a message of God’s love, and fulfilling that commandment of God is greater than any ‘offense’ one might cross.

John soaked this in, and it first came out during his days at Oxford. When the moniker ‘Methodist’ begins to be used, it described a group of four to five people, some students, some fellows, all at Oxford. John Wesley had already graduated but was hanging around campus because his younger brother, Charles, was enrolled. John had absolutely no idea what to do with his life, and his brother Charles had just begun this pietistic bible-centric group on campus. John, being John, took it over from his younger brother, and the group quickly began to be ridiculed for their peculiar

method of *doing* religion. They rose early; they studied Scripture intently; they prayed incessantly; they fasted; they talked openly about their spirituality; they visited the sick; they held each other accountable to it. In other words, they centered their lives on faith as love acted out. And this was weird. Most people, if they went to church or were welcomed into the sanctuary, sat down, listened to Scripture, heard to a sermon, and left. There was no action required of them except filling a seat in the pew on Sunday – and even then, this privilege was only reserved for a select few – those who had the proper dress to enter the Sanctuary, those who had access to a parish, those who had the luxury to take off the Sabbath from their labor.

The idea of faith existing beyond the walls of a church was anathema; the idea of faith being something that was *lived, acted out, embraced, embodied* – *that* challenged the status quo.

It wasn't only their action that made these Method-ists weird. It was also their willingness to break the political norms of the day by leaving the walls of the city and going out beyond them to where the 'people' were – to where the poor were, the outcast, the imprisoned. And they not only breached those walls, but they transgressed the religio-political and social boundaries of whom was deemed worthy of God's love. They began to preach to these folks, to minister with them, to ask them what their spirits needed.

About two years ago, British Methodist historian, Peter Forsaith, has found what he believes is the earliest written, published use of the term Methodist to describe Wesley and his group. It was printed in an Oxford newspaper in 1732 in reference to John Wesley's ministry with a particular inmate, Thomas Blair.

Most of the time, Wesley and his pals took food, drink, medicine, and reading materials to those imprisoned. They would pray with them and attend to their spirit. When they saw inhumane treatment directed at those who had no other options before them, they took it upon themselves to

hold the authorities accountable. But every now and then, their actions went further, and they experimented with legal advocacy on the behalf of a select few.

In 1732, this was particularly striking in Mr. Blair's case because he was on deathrow for the alleged crime of having a sexual relationship with another man. Given that the public believed this alleged crime "too indelicate to mention," Wesley and his friend, John Clayton, worried that Mr. Blair was being victimized by his fellow inmates and they sought to ensure his protection. Clayton and Wesley took a particular interest in his trial; they "marshal'd his evidence" and sought to ensure that the case would "convince any reasonable man of his innocence." The day of his trial, Wesley rose at 4am and rode twelve miles on a horse to be present. Unfortunately, Mr. Blair was found guilty in court, but his life was spared and he was fined 20 marks. Guess who raised the funds to get him out of jail – John Wesley. For overt defense of Blair and of all persons whose humanity was being questioned by authorities, John Wesley was deemed guilty in the public's eye. Forsaith argues that Wesley's defense of Mr. Blair was a public witness that "tipped the balance between the Methodists being tolerated and being castigated."

In 2023, as a person discerning what it means to be Methodist, I find it striking that we do not know this story; that one of Wesley's first and most bold acts of public witness was the defense of a man accused of *this* capital offense and *this* is how we got our name.

After Oxford, John struggled with how to continue to live into his peculiar call. A few years later, on May 24, 1738, John Wesley finally was assured of his faith when he felt his heart strangely warmed. While he was assured of God's love, he did not want to be another parish priest. This is where the city of Bristol comes to play.

Bristol

[slide 4] 2023 is not that different from Wesley's day. Many of the people in the 18th c. were 'nonnes' and 'dones'. They were tired of the institutional church because it did not meet their

everyday needs and it refused to change in order to do so. People were expected to pay taxes to support the local church, but they didn't see the local church as truly supporting their needs. The national landscape was broken up into parishes. For centuries, this parish system had functioned reasonably well. However, all of this came to an end during the Industrial Revolution. Transitioning from rural farming and pastoral economies, millions of people abandoned their long-held family lands in search of seemingly lucrative industrial jobs. As a result, mass migrations exploded across England and then on to the North American Colonies. The parish system quickly collapsed under the stress, and millions of these migrants suffered for the lack of support systems.

This provided critical opportunities for those early Methodist movements to evangelize and expand as they filled in the gaps through care of the poor and disenfranchised, through establishment of hospitals and schools. From the very beginning the itinerant commission demanded that we go to the collapsed places where life was most vulnerable and most disordered.

Wesley was called to Bristol in late March of 1739 by his longtime frenemy, George Whitefield. Whitefield had been in the city for a while preaching to ever increasing crowds. He calls on John to assist. John arrives on March 31 and was astounded to find Whitefield preaching to thousands in the fields. [slide 5] One year later, he wrote in his Journal, "I scarcely could reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields."¹

Up until this point, John had followed the preaching standards of his day: [slide 6] "I had been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church."²

[slide 7]

¹ John Wesley, *Journal* (March 1739).

² John Wesley, *Journal* (March 1739).

By April 2, only two days after his arrival, he does something he never thought he would: “At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people.”³

Fellow Methodist historian, Prof. Ted Campbell recently analyzed various primary sources of Wesley’s and concludes that John’s preaching in the fields was not an ‘in the moment movement of the Spirit.’ But was an intentional, well thought-out vocational *choice* to be more vile.⁴ Campbell reminds us that it wasn’t simply the act of preaching outdoors that broke the rules. It was Wesley’s preaching within another diocese, one that was not his own, that directly and openly violated church law. It was transgressive yet prophetic. [slide 8]

Vile. Now y’all who know me are probably rolling your eyes right now, but I truly believe that we have something to learn from Wesley’s submission to be more vile. I recently spoke to a group of clergypersons in the Tennessee Western KY annual conference. Afterwards, I received an email from the pastor of Grace UMC in Jackson TN. Rev Mary Beth Eberle called the action of Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey ‘vile’ and related this act to what we as Wesleyans are called to do in this world. The young adults who listened were so inspired by this idea Wesleyan *vile-tality* that they made a t-shirt for their upcoming beach trip: “Vile: It’s Four O’Clock Somewhere.” Dare I say it; If we want to be vital again, if we want to reach young people in new ways, if we want to revive, renew, reinvigorate, and reimagine our mission in this world – perhaps we first need to submit to be more vile.

My colleague, David Worthington who currently serves as the Director of Global Relationships at John Wesley’s New Room brilliantly states that ‘While John Wesley’s heart may

³ John Wesley, *Journal* (March 1739).

⁴ Ted A. Campbell “A Day in the Life of John Wesley: 2 April 1739.” *Methodist Review*, Vol 15. (January 2023) <https://methodistreview.org/index.php/mr>

have been strangely warmed in London, it was set afire in Bristol.’ Within three days of being in Bristol, Wesley’s entire framework of how to preach, where to preach, and what is proper versus what is missionally prophetic was wholly overthrown. This experience shook his foundational understanding of normativity, of acceptability, and replaced them with a desire to follow the spirit of God and meet the people wherever they were. This is Wesleyan prophetic offense – or Wesleyan vile-tality.

[slide 9] And the submission to be more vile didn’t end with John. When it comes to prophetic offense, I’m often drawn to the words of Mary Fletcher Bosanquet. She was one of the first female preachers of Wesley’s movement and of her own preaching she stated,

I am conscious how ridiculous I must appear in the eyes of many for so doing. Therefore, if some persons consider me an impudent woman, and represent me as such, I cannot blame them... Besides, I do nothing but what Mr. Wesley approves; and as to reproach thrown by some one me, what have I to do with it, but quietly go forward saying, ‘I will still be more vile, if my Lord requires it.’⁵

Amen.

Advice to the People Called Methodist

After Bristol, Wesley developed a new ecclesiology for the people called Methodist. They were going to *do* church differently, [slide 10] But how? Around 1745, John Wesley wrote a treatise entitled “Advice to the People Called Methodists,” and it is through these words of Wesley that we can learn of his hopes for peoples. And I think these five pieces of advice might work well in a conversation of how do we shape our future as United Methodists in order to better serve those around the world.

For context, Wesley was trying to piece together a unified missional movement in the midst of mass chaos as to who was Methodist and who wasn’t – sound familiar? He began this treatise

⁵ Donna Fowler-Marchant. *Mothers in Israel: Methodist Beginnings through the Eyes of Women*. Nashville, TN: Wesley’s Foundery Books, 2020.

with an acknowledgment that there were many people who were identifying as Methodist but didn't necessarily align with his understanding of faith acted out through love – sound familiar? So, he's writing to those Methodists who “profess to pursue...holiness of heart and life.” Over the next few pages, he advises these people of five things. Take these to heart:

- 1) “you are a new people;”
- 2) “do not imagine that you can avoid giving offence;”
- 3) “trust God with your all, then go on in the power of [God's] might;”
- 4) “Keep in your path...and be true to your principles;” and
- 5) “not to talk much of what you suffer.”⁶

How might the continuing UMC take John Wesley's advice from 1745 and apply it towards our own future?

Well, first, we could be a new people. We have an interesting opportunity to pivot and reclaim ourselves as new. In our past splits and mergers, it seems clear that we rarely took advantage of these transitional moments to really figure out who we are and to boldly proclaim our identity, our mission, our space in the world. Think back to the dozens of splinters experienced in the first fifty years of the MEC. When the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Methodist Protestants, and the Wesleyan Methodists, and so many more chose to leave the MEC, the MEC didn't change. It refused to change out of fear of losing more members.

We have before us now, a moment to do just that. To rethink who we want to be in the future. We have a chance to be proactive. To be prophetic. To be vile. The question is: “Are we brave enough to do it?”

And this is where Wesley's second piece of advice comes in handy. We have to remember to not be afraid to offend people. John Wesley and those at Oxford were given many monikers for their weird way of doing religion. But the name that stuck with them the longest was Method-ist.

⁶ John Wesley. *Advice to the People Called Methodist*. 1745.

And we need to remember that we cease to be Methodist when we forget that our name was first an insult. Not everyone is going to like who we are or what we're doing. We have to be willing to make people uncomfortable, to open ourselves up to critique. Because the love of God compels us to be weird, to experiment, to do things that others wouldn't, and to love people who others say aren't worthy of it. John Wesley was disparaged in his day. People who joined the Methodists were often disowned from their families. They were seen as an absurd, ridiculous group. They didn't gamble, didn't drink, didn't attend the theater, and walked around talking about universal salvation. They visited the sick and the imprisoned. They prayed incessantly. They let women preach. They mixed genders in secret meeting rooms. They critiqued slavery at the height of the Atlantic slave trade. All of this was quite offensive to the majority of people in England. But good Lord, what an example they were!

How can the continuing UMC reclaim this type of prophetic offense? How can we dare to love God and spread God's love in such ways that it just irks people to their core? What if we were to praise persons who dared to do ministry differently – persons who were willing, as the late and great John Lewis said, to get into good trouble? What stances should we take publicly that will get people talking about us...nay even protesting us?

Wesley's third and fourth points come in handy. The Lord does not ask us to do anything that we cannot do because God is always with us and anything is possible with God. All of this struggle, strife, and ridicule will be worth it in the end because we will be living a life of inward and outward holiness.

And finally, Wesley advises his people to not complain, to not suffer openly, about their ridicule and to not condemn those who offer critique. Good Lord, could we use this message. What this denomination is experiencing right now is not easy, nor should it be easy. We should all take a

moment to grieve United Methodism as we've known it, but we also need to intentionally let ourselves dream, hope, prophesize...and re-engage the true Wesley.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to get a bit personal. I want to share one of the main reasons that I stay United Methodist. I do not have to tell you all gathered in this room that my parents were both ordained clergypersons who served for a combined total of over sixty-five years in this annual conference. And I do want to take a brief moment and divert from this talk and say thank you to each and every one of you for your outpouring of love to myself and my family over this last year. More importantly, I want to thank you all for your continued, tireless, love-filled, vile witness in this conference. Mom and dad's ministries ended way too early, but their witness lives on through you all so thank you. And y'all who truly knew my parents know where I get this vitality spirit from. But I don't stay UM because it is how I was raised or out of habit. I stay United Methodist because of its public witness, its bending the rules, its willingness to go above and beyond established norms in order to spread the love of God.

Our job is not to set up the UMC for today or even tomorrow. We must set the stage for the UMC, 100 years from now. In 100 years, I don't want our generations to think wow they had a shot in 2023 if only they had taken it. No, let's get them to say, oh my goodness, during a global pandemic, during disaffiliations, during warfare, climate change, economic injustice, a global racial reckoning – in the mist of all of this, those United Methodists, they sought to be new – to be different – they sought to embrace their Wesleyan roots as vile persons who compelled others towards inward and outward holiness, who lived their faith through radical acts of love.

Y'all, if we want to be vital again as The United Methodist Church, we must first be willing to do the unimaginable, to preach in new fields, to create new communities in a disconnected world. We must embrace Wesley, we must dare to risk, dare to fail, dare to be ridiculed and the talk of the

town. If we want to be vital again, y'all we might first have to be willing to submit to be more vile, and truly embrace our roots. Thank you.