

As he trudged down the road to a Bible Study on Aldersgate Street in London back on May 24, 1738, he was despondent. Despondent because as a pastor he was a complete failure, despondent because a relationship had failed, despondent because he believed if he died that night the gates of heaven would be forever locked to him, despondent because he believed God could not possibly forgive him of his sins, which, truth be told, were not that many and not that grievous.

If you have been a Methodist long enough, you know that the pastor I'm talking about is John Wesley, the spiritual founder of Methodism. And you might even have experienced some of the same feelings in your life. But let me explain how he came to be

walking despondently down the road. And the transformation that lay ahead.

John Wesley. Brilliant, the son of an Anglican priest, the youngest of seventeen or so children, born 1703. When he was but six, there was a fire in the parsonage. Everyone got out OK, but wait, look up, there was little John, called Jackie, trapped on the second floor. At the last minute, someone braved the fire and rescued him, right as the flames demolished that house.

From then on he was told, and he believed, that God had saved him from the flames for a purpose, that he was destined for great things. Now, if you have been told that, it would make you perhaps just a little arrogant, and maybe just a little apprehensive that maybe you didn't quite measure up to your

calling, to your destiny.

He took his exam for Oxford, and wrote it in Greek, and bragged that he knew more than the professor who gave the exam. He went to Oxford, and made some friends, and bothered a few others. There was quaint custom in those days that if no one showed up for a lecture, the professor could go home and call it a day's work. It was customary that no one would come for a Friday lecture. Except, John Wesley, he was always there.

He was an earnest and believing young man. His brother Charles, who would write thousands of hymns, two of which we have sung today, as well as "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" and "Christ the Lord is Risen today," his brother Charles was already

at Oxford and had formed the Holy Club.

This was a group of young men who sought to earn their way into God's good graces daily. They would arise early, and pray, and study, and then after class go do good deeds, such as feeding the poor or visiting prisons.

Good stuff, but they were a little arrogant about it, and it seemed as if sometimes what they did was not for the sake of the poor or the imprisoned, but for the sake of their own souls.

Being in a college town, some made fun of them. Some called them Bible Moths, because they hung around the Bible like a moth around a flame. Others teased, they are trying to get to heaven by following the same schedule every day, getting to heaven by a certain Method. That name stuck, they became

called Methodists.

And since it wasn't really that cruel of a name and since there was an element of truth to it, the term Holy Club fell into disuse, and soon they were all known, even to themselves, as Methodists.

But back to John Wesley. Got ordained. His father wanted him to help him, but that wasn't grand enough for a young man destined to be great. And so he became a missionary to the colony of Georgia. Was going to convert all the heathens, all the Native Americans. Instead, he was a colossal failure. Fell in love, but couldn't decide what to do about it. After all, if he got married, that would be less time for him to devote to God.

And every night, he would confess his sins, and worry about sins that he might have not confessed, and worried that what he did was not good enough to be accepted by God. Eventually, he told his girlfriend, Sophey, goodbye, and she, not growing any younger, married another young man.

They came back from their honeymoon, and Wesley wouldn't serve them Communion because they had missed church the week before, and Sophey's husband sued him for libel, which in those days could land you in jail, and so, under cover of darkness, Wesley snuck aboard a ship in Savannah harbor and headed back to England.

What if your best just isn't good enough? Well, we've all experienced that, and we manage to survive. We don't get into

the college of our choice, but we do go somewhere else. That promotion doesn't come through, but there's always next year.

To be human is to fall short, at least in some areas. We know it, we acknowledge it, we deal with it, and we move on.

But what if your best isn't good enough to get you into heaven? Or if you're afraid that your best might not be good enough to offer you eternal life? What if you're afraid that your sins will keep God from loving you?

That was Wesley's dilemma. Believing he was better than most, and believing that he was destined for great things, he was a colossal failure. Convinced the gates of heaven would be closed forever to him.

But when he finally made it to that Bible Study that night on Aldersgate Street, he heard some teaching from the Letter to the Romans, teaching which transformed his life, and in fact transformed the world.

May 24 is Aldersgate Day, the 269th Anniversary of what happened to him. What happened to him was that he finally understood. Understood that God loved him, not because of his success or failure, sin or righteousness, but because that's God's nature.

As Mr. Wesley put it: *In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate- Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the*

heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Our Methodist faith is centered here: on God's loving and forgiving nature, which is perhaps most powerfully stated in our Scripture this morning: God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. A technical term for this is "Prevenient Grace." God loves us before we love him, and God seeks us out, not waiting for us.

And St. Paul goes further: even if indeed we are worthy of God's wrath, that is deserving of God's righteous judgment upon our sins, we are saved from that, through the death of Jesus Christ.

God's love for us is such that God chooses to, when it comes to judging us, God chooses to make his decision about us based not on our sinfulness, but on Jesus' righteousness. We don't earn love such as this; we don't deserve love such as this. God is not required to treat us this way, but he does, for such is his love for us.

Are you good enough for heaven? It's a question a Christian doesn't really ever have to ask. Because our eternal destiny is determined not by our fitness for the Kingdom, but by the enormity of Christ's love for us, that he should die for us while we are yet sinners, and the enormity of God's love for us, that He would accept the sacrifice and obedience of Jesus as being sufficient to justify us, that is to treat us as if we WERE IN FACT just enough, righteous enough, to be welcomed into the

kingdom.

But the savior we worship is not a dead savior, not just a sacrificial lamb who is killed and then discarded. No, even when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to God by Jesus's death, and we shall be saved through Jesus' life. That is Jesus is alive today, interceding with God, and interceding in our lives. Because Jesus lives, we, too shall live.

Now, this is complicated theological stuff, and a brief few minutes cannot begin to do it justice. But one thing we might want to remember is this: for St. Paul, this is not mere speculation. It is the story of his life. He was an enemy of God, persecuting believers in Christ, and when he felt his work was completed in Jerusalem, he asked for, and received, permission

to go to Damascus and persecute the Christians there.

But on the road, the Spirit of the Living Lord encountered Paul, forgave him, claimed him, and set him to work as an evangelist and missionary. Jesus' died not just for friends, but for God's enemies. That's what Paul learned in his life. That's what Paul preached.

That's what Mr. Wesley learned. And almost immediately, once he got over his self-absorbed desire for salvation, and accept salvation as a gift, and then went about joyfully proclaiming God's merciful love, the Methodist movement exploded first in England, then Wales and Ireland, then over to the colonies, and eventually into every continent and finally even to Beaufort.

This simple message. Whatever our sin. Whatever our failure, God loves us. And Jesus died for us while we were yet sinners. And even if we are living as enemies of God, as St. Paul was, God calls out to us, claims us, loves us, redeems us, restores us.

And so on this Confirmation Day, when our young people, having made perhaps the first adult decision of their lives, to live out their faith as full participants in the ministry and mission of a church, may we reflect again on this wondrous love God has for us. The love it took Mr. Wesley years to understand, when on May 24, 1738 he felt his heart strangely warmed by God's love and forgiveness. But our celebration isn't really so much what happened to Mr. Wesley 269 years ago.

Our celebration is that today the Spirit of God is waiting to touch

your heart and my heart again with the promise of absolute forgiveness, the promise of unconditional love, the promise of eternal life. Because while we were still sinners, Jesus died on the cross for us. Such was his love for John Wesley, such is his love for you and me, and such is his love for those we have welcomed as members of the Body of Christ this morning. And such is the foundation of faith upon which all Christians, from Paul to Mr. Wesley to you and me and those who have confirmed their faith this morning, stand. Amen.