

The Main Thing
John 14:15-21
May 29, 2011
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Tornadoes have been ripping apart communities like Joplin, Missouri. We've watched folks on the news pawing through the rubble looking for something to salvage. One couple looked at each, and the woman said, "There's nothing left. But we have each other—that's all that matters."

I attended a memorial service for a teacher who died quite suddenly at the high school where I was teaching. A lot of people attended, and there was an open mike, and many of the students wanted to say something about Mr. Lyons. They said things like, "He was such a nice person. He always had time for students. He gave a lot of love." I was surprised that nobody said how hard he worked, or even how much biology kids learned in his class. They all talked about his kind way with people. That was the main thing.

Stephen Covey, author and leadership consultant, says, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."

The CEO of a large company was floundering. He knew he stared failure in the face. He wanted to pull his workforce out of a production tailspin, but he didn't know how. So, he swallowed his pride, called in a consultant, and admitted he needed advice. The consultant asked the CEO to list what he did in the course of a normal week. Once this was done, she told the CEO to rank the list in priority, starting with #1. "What's the main thing you need to do?" She said, "Put that first." This took a while, but when the list was finished, the CEO gave it to the consultant, and she told him what he needed to do. "When you come to work," she said, "complete item #1 before attending to item #2, and complete item #2 before going to item #3. The next day, take out the list and start with item #1 again, and repeat the process. Do the same every day. Don't worry if you fail to reach lower items on your priority list. — That's it." The CEO tried it and, low and behold, he turned the company around. He lived into his own priorities, and his workforce followed" ([http://www.stpetersphila.org/Portals/0/Sermons/2009-03 15%20Lent%20III.pdf](http://www.stpetersphila.org/Portals/0/Sermons/2009-03%20Lent%20III.pdf)).

Whatever you say is most important—that's the main thing.

One of the Pharisees, a lawyer, asked Jesus, "'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to them, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mt. 22:36-39).

Of all the 613 laws in the Torah (the Laws of Moses in the Hebrew Bible), Jesus had no trouble picking the top two. Jesus was very clear about what was important: #1 loving God and #2 loving neighbor—He got these straight from the Books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus in our Old Testament. He put them as priorities, first and second, over everything else. We call this the "Love Commandment."

Many Wesley scholars have helped us understand the main ideas of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement. Wesley was an extremely prolific writer—of sermons, journal entries, commentaries on books of the Bible, and letters. When trying to understand his teachings, it is helpful to hear from a contemporary scholar, who asks the question, "What are Wesley's most important ideas for us today? What's the main thing?"

Theodore Runyon wrote a book in 1998 about John Wesley's theology, called *The New Creation*. In it, he gives us a clear essence of John Wesley's thinking for today. You could imagine two bookends: "Creation," and "New Creation." "Creation" is the idea that we are all created in God's image, blessed with grace and opportunity and free will. Blessed to be a blessing. And on the other end of the bookshelf is the "New Creation." The "New Creation" is the result of living into God's grace, experiencing forgiveness and new life, and practicing holy living, which means loving God and loving our neighbor. And Wesley was always practical; he didn't just talk theology. He put some content between the bookends. Even in the 18th century when Wesley lived, he was dealing with issues that seem very contemporary today. Between the bookends of Creation and New Creation, he applied the commandments to love God and neighbor to three issues of his time: Human Rights, the Rights of the Poor, and the Rights of Women. Because Wesley felt so strongly about the love commandment from Jesus, Wesley took on the human rights issue of his time: slavery. Wesley's last letter, written from his deathbed, was to a member of Parliament urging him to vote against slavery. (Finally in 1805, 13 years after Wesley's death, England abolished slavery.)

Wesley's interpretation of loving God and neighbor meant giving all he could to the poor. Wesley records that one year his income was 30 pounds and his living expenses 28 pounds, so he had 2 pounds to give to the poor. The next year his income doubled, but he still managed to live on 28 pounds, so he had 32 pounds to give to the poor. In the third year, his income jumped to 90 pounds. Instead of letting his expenses rise with his income, he kept his expenses to 28 pounds and gave away 62 pounds to the poor. In the fourth year, he received 120 pounds. As before, his expenses were 28 pounds, so his giving rose to 92 pounds. Giving to the poor was that important to him.

In terms of the rights of women, Wesley recruited women to lead his women's bands—like our small groups—and then when the bands grew into societies and became integrated for men and women, women, as well as men, were encouraged to lead the societies and be lay preachers in meeting houses all through the British Isles.

The first Methodists lived out their faith in these concrete ways. Because they experienced God's love, they wanted to love and respect all people—slaves, the poor, and yes, even women! Loving your neighbor was not just in the family or immediate neighborhood; it was in society, working for social change. The Creation was to be reborn in faithful living, such that believers would experience a New Creation.

Issues that would be added into this little library between the bookends, today, would be Environmental Stewardship, and Ecumenism. Wesley spoke about caring for God's natural

world and about relating in love to people of different faiths. And the human rights issue would not be dealing with slavery today, but I think the issue would be dealing with rights of gay and lesbian people. These issues had not come to be social issues in 18th century England, as they are today global issues. When we study the issues of our time through the lens of the love commandment, human rights, rights of the poor, women's rights, environmental stewardship, and ecumenism are issues of faith. Here is where we can apply our theology.

So, what's the main thing here? What is at the core of all of these social issues? Love.

An issue in the news this week that has been tugging at my heart is the story about girls in India.

India's 2011 census shows a serious decline in the number of girls under the age of seven. Activists fear eight million female fetuses may have been aborted in the past decade in India. Let's personalize the story:

An Indian woman, named Kulwant, has three daughters aged 24, 23 and 20, and a son who is 16. In the years between the birth of her third daughter and her one son, Kulwant became pregnant three times. Each time, her family forced her to abort the fetus after ultrasound tests confirmed that they were girls. Until her son was born, Kulwant's daily life consisted of beatings and abuse from her husband, mother-in-law, and brother-in-law. Once, she says, they even attempted to set her on fire. "They were angry. They didn't want girls in the family. They wanted boys so they could get fat dowries," she says. India outlawed dowries in 1961, but the practice remains rampant, and the value of dowries is constantly growing, affecting rich and poor alike. "My mother-in-law said if I had another daughter, my husband would leave me. Thankfully, I had a son," she says. Kulwant's husband died three years after the birth of their son. She says, "It was the curse of the daughters we killed." She concluded, "That's why he died so young,"

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13264301>).

This is so much more than a family problem. It is a social problem. What is at the core of the problem? What's the main thing? The lack of respect for girls and women. And, especially poor women. It is a human rights issue, an issue of rights of the poor, and an issue of rights of women. This is a current issue, the kind of issue Wesley would have spoken out about.

Many of you remember the film, "The Blind Side" (2009) with Sandra Bullock and Quinton Aaron. Quinton Aaron plays Michael Oher, who is 17, and has been in foster care with different families, one after the other, in Nashville, TN because his mother is somewhere, who knows where, and is addicted to drugs. Michael keeps running away; he does poorly in school. Somebody notices Michael's athletic ability and convinces a coach to get him accepted into a private Christian school. Leigh Anne a wealthy suburban parent at the school, played by Sandra Bullock, sees Michael walking on a road late at night after a volleyball game. He's shivering, and she stops him and asks, "Do you have any place to stay

tonight?" He doesn't answer, so she says, "Come on." So she takes him home with her. There's the scene when she shows him the guest room. He says, "It's nice. I never had one before." She says, "What, a room to yourself?" "A bed." The family invites him to stay for the holiday, and then little by little he becomes part of the family and eventually goes on to play football for the University of Mississippi. Later, the real Michael Oher is drafted for the Baltimore Ravens in the NFL. Something was incomplete about this suburban family before Michael. There's a scene in the beginning where Leigh Anne is serving take-out food from the kitchen counter. Her husband says, "Thank your mother for driving to the store and getting this." Michael entered their lives and the family spent more time together. They cooked and ate diner together. Leigh Anne's friends think she's gone crazy. But they say, patronizingly, "I think what you are doing is so great. Opening up your home to him... honey, you are changing that boy's life." And she says, "No, he's changing mine." She goes to all his games, and she stands up for Michael when someone tries to pick a fight. She tells him, "Someone threatens my son, they threaten me."

She's straightforward and sassy. It's like she's saying, "I'm your mom. I will not leave you orphaned."

"I will not leave you orphaned." Sounds like Jesus' words in John's Gospel, when he is soon to leave his disciples. And he wants to summarize things—the things he's been teaching about. He wants to leave his followers with *the main thing* to remember. So he says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). It's all about love. That's *the main thing*. And the "main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."