

“John Wesley”
by Rev. Nancy Landauer
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I’d like to begin today with a prayer. This prayer was written by Susanna Wesley, the mother of John and Charles Wesley. “You, O Lord, have called us to watch and pray. Therefore, whatever may be the sin against which we pray, make us careful to watch against it, and so have reason to expect that our prayers will be answered. In order to perform this duty aright, grant us grace to preserve a sober, equal temper, and sincerity to pray for your assistance. Amen.”

I had to think about the words for a few minutes. This is the woman who raised 20 children on the small salary of a priest. Susanna was an unusual woman for her time in England in the 18th century. Her father had been a priest of the Church of England and believed in education for both boys and girls. Susanna had an excellent education. She could read Latin, Greek and Hebrew. She read the scriptures and the early Christians writers assiduously. She spent time each week with each of her children training them and giving them a theological education as well.

I think the prayer gives us a small lens through which to look at what Susanna was like. Imagine having a mother that taught you from the time you were very young, “Know what your sins are, be careful to pray every day that you are not enticed by your sins, and expect God to answer your prayers, so that by grace you may receive assistance not to sin.” It sounds a little harsh to our ears; I have trouble when I begin to think about teaching a small child what sin is and teaching them to ask God to help them to not fall into sin every day. I don’t think any of us would do that today in the 21st century.

And yet, as an adult when I think about it, it is such an important prayer. My Mother used to say something like it. When there was some kind of squabble with my sisters, my mother would say, “Families are the way that God uses to rub away our rough edges.” In other words we come to learn about our sins first from our families. As I got older I realized we come to discover our faults and failings in the work place, in our relationships with other people and even in our faith community. Susanna’s prayer is good advice. Learn your particular tendency to sin, early in life and continue to pray for assistance from God to overcome it.

I think that John Wesley learned that lesson very well. He and his brother Charles went off to Oxford College and studied theology. John did well. After graduation he took a small parish for a time and then went back to teach at Oxford. He said he liked being on the faculty because that gave him an opportunity to preach at a wide variety of local parishes. As a young man he had a great passion for God, instilled in him early by his mother.

When he was at Oxford, he and his brother Charles formed a small group of fellows who met every day to read the scripture and pray together. They also felt it was most important to do what they called a ‘good work’ every day. They agreed it was most important to do these three things every day without fail. Read scripture, pray, and do a good work in God’s name. John did his good works at the poor houses and the prisons. He faithfully accompanied quite a few men and women who were being hung for thievery or other criminal offenses to their execution.

The Oxford Group of students all adhered so rigidly to their daily schedule that other students began to laugh at them and called them Methodists. Even though it was

meant as derogatory, the name stuck and eventually John and Charles just accepted the name.

While John was at Oxford, he carried on a lively correspondence with his Mother. He would discuss his developing ideas about whom and what he thought God was like. His Mother would write back and as often as not correct John, citing the early Church fathers and discussing scripture. Susanna continued to be a strong influence on John's thinking.

Probably as a result of his training by his Mother, as a young man, John continued to worry about how he could be sure he was saved. He had grown up with stern warning about sin. He prayed hard to not be caught up by sin and yet he couldn't convince himself that he was well and truly loved by God. One of the major public controversies of the day was arguments for and against predestination. Calvinists were sure that God chose only a certain number of people who would be saved and these people were chosen by God before they were born. Calvinists believed that no amount of praying and good works could earn you a place in heaven. No matter how he struggled John couldn't quite convince himself that he wasn't among those who were not chosen by God to be saved.

Almost on a whim, but perhaps initiated by John's desire to save himself, John and his brother Charles left their good positions at Oxford and volunteered to go to Georgia in the colonies as a missionary to the Native Americans.

John was appointed to be the priest to a group of colonists in Georgia and also sent out to convert the Native Americans. John was an utter and complete failure at both. He spent about two years struggling in this rural outpost. He had a most difficult time connecting with the Indians; when he did they were completely uninterested. He seemed

a very foolish fellow. Dressed as a member of the English Gentry, he rode out into the forest without any concept of what Indian life in the wilderness was like. He was quite unsuited to spending time in the wilderness and he had little appreciation for Native American lifestyle or culture. He never converted a single Native American.

His sojourn as the English priest of the colony was an even bigger disaster. John became engaged to a young woman whose father was an important farmer and leader of the community. John was so busy with his duties; he seldom found time to visit his fiancé. Their courtship lasted more than a year, but it was mostly a courtship in name only. Visiting for social pleasure just didn't rate very highly for John. However, when his fiancé eloped with another man, John was highly embarrassed and full of rage. When the honeymooning couple returned John was so angry that he refused to give the couple communion. John, not being particularly well liked by his small church, was going to be put on trial for refusing to give communion. He literally had to escape out of town in the middle of the night to avoid being tarred and feathered.

His trip home wasn't any better. On the boat they hit a terrible storm. The small ship was tossed back and forth. The passengers and the crew were all sure they were about to be drowned in the sea. John was mightily impressed by a small group of passengers who were Moravians. These Christians gathered together and sang hymns. They were calm in the middle of the storm and showed no fear. John himself was terrified of dying and felt completely unsure of whether or not he would go to heaven. After the storm he got acquainted with the Moravians. He wanted to know just what was it that gave them such calm certainty that were loved and saved by God. The Moravians

told John that they knew in their hearts that they were loved and saved by Christ. They felt sure that all of God's children were saved.

After John arrived home, it was not long before John, attending a Bible study, felt the calm, warm and loving embrace of the Christ spirit. At the age of 37, John was at last freed to go about his life with a confident Spirit. Instead of spending so much energy in worry and anxiety, John began to feel free to live as he felt God wanted him to live. John was able to put his whole life and all his relationships in the hands of God. John was able to pray and live without worry about what others will think of him or how the world will view him. In his covenant prayer he prays that God will use his skills and talents.

Whether he was successful or whether he was a failure, whether he had money or whether he had no money, however God wanted to use Wesley, Wesley prayed that he could be open to God's will. This morning before communion we will read John's covenant prayer together that is an insert in our bulletin. So often when we pray we are asking God for specific things. Wesley models for us in this prayer, what it means to be totally committed to the Christian life. It is quite an awesome prayer to begin the New Year with. I invite you to take the prayer home with you. Keep it on your bedside table. Let's sing the hymns of Charles Wesley as we prepare ourselves for the Covenant prayer and Communion.