

The Road Less Traveled – September 27, 2019

One of my favorite jobs ever was when I was a newspaper editorial writer. I got to write every day, but not before the Editorial Board met and decided as a group what we would write about and what the newspaper's position would be. Then it was my job to turn that position into a readable, articulate 400-500 words. The best part about it was that I didn't have to come up with the idea.

That's the hardest part for me – the inspiration. During my newspaper career, when I would be called upon to write a column, that's when I really struggled. Because a column can be about anything the columnist chooses. I would ponder and often agonize for days trying to come up with what to write about. That still happens to me sometimes today, as I am called upon to share with you each week in this space. The deadline looms large for me each week as I try to find inspiration from somewhere.

Sometimes it comes in the most unexpected places.

Earlier this week I was doing some research for this weekend's sermon. The passage from Matthew's Gospel sent me back to Isaiah, and the notes from the Isaiah passage mentioned a particular sermon of John Wesley's had delved into those particular verses. Oh great! A John Wesley sermon.

Now I know as a United Methodist pastor I'm supposed to love John Wesley. After all, he launched the Methodist movement within the Anglican Church that eventually became a new denomination – ours. But I am not a fan of his sermons. I've joked before that he must have had an incredible delivery, because from a content standpoint, his sermons are a struggle. They are incredibly long, very complicated and, well, pretty dense and dry. So much so that it's hard to imagine any congregation today hanging on until the end of one of them.

But I waded in, nonetheless, to John Wesley's sermon "Scriptural Christianity." He preached it originally at St. Mary's Church at Oxford University on Aug. 24, 1744. The basic point of the sermon is a call for self-reflection, questioning whether the Christianity we live looks the same as the Christianity that is articulated in Scripture. But as I was skimming the sermon, one passage caught my eye. Wesley said this:

Brethren, I am persuaded better things of you, though I thus speak. Let me ask you then, in tender love, and in the spirit of meekness, Is this city a Christian city? Is Christianity, scriptural Christianity, found here? Are we, considered as a community of men, so filled with the Holy Ghost, as to enjoy in our hearts, and show forth in our lives, the genuine fruits of that Spirit? Are all the Magistrates, all heads and Governors of Colleges and Halls, and their respective Societies (not to speak of the inhabitants of the town), of one heart and one soul? Is the love of God shed abroad in our hearts? Are our tempers the same that were in him? And are our lives agreeable thereto? Are we holy as he who hath called us is holy in all manner of conversation?

What I heard as I read those words, however, was a little different. Here's what I heard:

Let us ask each other then, in tender love, and in the spirit of meekness, is our church a Christian church? Is Christianity – honestly scriptural Christianity -- found here? Are we seen as a community of believers so filled with the Holy Spirit as to enjoy in our hearts, and show forth in our lives, the genuine fruits of that Spirit? Is the entire family – the pastor, the elected church leaders, the oldest member down to the youngest -- of one heart and one soul? Does the love of God overflow our hearts in a real and tangible way? Are our tempers the same that were in Jesus? And are our lives agreeable because of it? Are we holy -- as the One who calls us to be holy -- in all manner of conversation?

And I couldn't help but think that we should be asking this often of each other and of our church. For when we talk about our vision of *Cultivating a Passion for Christ*, surely that's what we mean.

See you Sunday.