

“Living in the House of Religion”
Ezekiel 11:14-21, Ephesians 4:11-16
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 1, 2009

Once John Wesley was certain of his own salvation, he started one of the great revivals in history, one that is still being felt today. At the core of that revival was his understanding of salvation. He often referred to it as a journey into the house of religion. Over the past three weeks, we have discovered the yard, the porch, and the door of religion. Today we get to walk into the house itself. And according to Wesley, living in this house was the essence of salvation.

“I’ll give you a new heart. I’ll put a new spirit in you. I’ll cut out your stone heart and replace it with a red-blooded, firm-muscled heart.” Ezekiel 11:19, The Message

“Are you going on to perfection?” John Wesley

The inside of the house was even better than I expected. Oh sure, architecturally it was amazing. Massive Douglas fir trusses created a huge great room. White oak flooring, large wool area rugs, and comfortably worn leather sofas that looked as if they would engulf anyone who sat in them gave the room a marvelous glow. Smaller trusses created passageways and left room for staircases to other parts of the house. And of course, over the exquisitely carved mantle on the beautifully sculpted fireplace was a perfectly painted game day portrait of Memorial Stadium, awash in scarlet and cream. Yet even more attractive than the various appointments of the house, was the feeling that I was finally home. From the moment that I first saw it, it seemed as if this was where I was always meant to be. But then that should come as no surprise. After all, that is what the journey of faith was all about. As I thought back and remembered everything that had happened to me up to this point, how I woke up to find that I had been led to the yard of religion, that I had been helped to step onto the porch of religion, and that I had been allowed to open up and walk through the door of religion. Now I had finally come to the place where I had wanted to be all along, standing inside the house of religion itself. “Which,” my friend added quickly, “your good buddy John Wesley referred to as ‘sanctification.’”

I wondered why he had to ruin the moment. Old John couldn’t just leave it be. He had to assign names to almost everything. But then again, that *is* why he was called a *Method*-ist. “Okay,” I said, “I guess I should have seen that one coming. Even so, I

haven't the slightest idea what that's all about. I can't remember the last time I heard a sermon about sanctification." My friend frowned. "Yeah, that's tragic. About 20 years after Wesley died, some folks started to talk about sanctification in a way that others simply could not accept. There is no need to get into all of that now. Suffice it to say that instead of trying to iron out their differences, the majority of Methodists—and Christians in general—just stopped talking about it altogether. But just because something isn't talked about, doesn't mean it's not important. That's the way it is with sanctification. It is probably the most important leg of the faith journey that nobody ever mentions—or has even heard of. Perhaps we can find a way to change all of that. What do you say?"

"Sure. Where do we start?" He invited me to have a seat on one of the sofas. "There are a lot of ways to talk about sanctification, but let's start with this: do you remember Mr. and Mrs. Taylor?" he asked thoughtfully. Of course I did. They were members of Cunningham UMC, one of the four churches that made up the Deport circuit—my very first appointment. The Taylors lived just two doors down from the church. "Do you remember where you sat the first time you went to visit them?" As a matter of fact, I remembered it quite vividly. Even though she lived on the edge of a cotton field in the middle of the Northeast Texas prairie, Mrs. Taylor was a most gracious host—a fine Southern lady. We sat in the parlor, and she served me sweet tea and cookies. "Right. Now after you were there a few more times," he asked me, "where did your visits take place?" "In the kitchen," I replied. "Very good. Great memory. Now think hard. You had been there almost a year. You had developed a fairly good relationship with them. During that very cold rain in March, when Mr. Taylor became so ill, where did y'all sit and talk?" I was beginning to see where he was going. "In the bedroom, right next to that old gas space heater. He was resting in bed, Mrs. Taylor was in her rocker knitting, and I sat on the couch as we watched 'As the World Turns.'" He smiled. "In other words, the more you got to know them, the closer and closer the three of you became. In a sense, that is what the whole idea of sanctification is all about—becoming closer and closer to God."

I liked that analogy. It was fairly easy to understand. Yet he didn't stop there. "As I mentioned, there are a lot of ways to talk about sanctification. Ezekiel and Jeremiah used to talk about the change from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh. Paul liked to talk about spiritual or Christian maturity. I think one of the words that might be helpful at this point is holiness. That's an idea that is found throughout the scripture. Do you remember what it means to be holy?" As we had talked a lot about that in the Disciple Bible Study, I responded rather quickly. "Sure, to be holy is to set apart. Whether it is a god or the ground under a burning bush or a temple or a book like the Bible, something becomes holy when it's set apart." "That's right," he said. "Throughout the story of the Bible, the chosen people were called to be holy, to be set apart, to be different from everyone and everything around them. That is why those 613 laws were given to the Israelites. Moses reminded them, 'as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves.' Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophesized that the birth of his son would help people to 'serve [God] without fear and in holiness.' And the writer of the letter to the Hebrews told his readers to 'Pursue...holiness without which no one will see the Lord.' Even the Sermon on the Mount says to 'Be perfect—which is another word for holy—even as your heavenly Father is perfect.' Now when you combine all of that with what you remember about your visits to Mr. and Mrs. Taylor, tell me again why do you think that the people of the Bible, whether they were found in the Old Testament or the New, were called to be holy?" That seemed easy. "Because in that way they were able to draw closer to God?" I wondered.

"Bingo," he said. "You're getting it. But there was and still is one big problem. Only God is holy or perfect. Try as they might, there was no way that Moses or the Israelites were ever able to obey all 613 of those laws. So how could they or you or anyone else be holy?" That sounded like a trick question to me, so I just stood there. I'd gotten this far and didn't want to be wrong. So after a moment of silence he said, "You can't. There is no way that you or anyone else can ever be holy enough to sit in the presence of the Lord. But not to worry. There is good news, you see. How can it happen? Let me give you a hint: we've already talked about Wesley's different categories of grace. As you have already learned, he reminded the church that prevenient grace brought

people to the yard of religion, repenting grace let them step onto the porch of religion, and justifying grace enabled them to open and step through the door of religion. Grace is that unmerited love which God is more than ready to freely give everyone, right? It is what God gave you to get you to this very point. Now you are standing in middle of the house of religion, which Brother John called ‘sanctification,’ and your purpose here is to draw closer and closer to the heart of God. There is no way you could ever do it on your own. So tell me, how does it happen? C’mon, this is easy. Even those Methodists who spent the last 20 years in Mississippi should know this one!” “Ha, ha,” I said. “Real funny. At least they know the right way to do barbecue and catfish. Okay, the answer is ‘sanctifying grace.’ In other words, it’s a gift of God.”

“You got it,” he smiled. “Through sanctifying grace, people are able to draw closer and closer to God. Wesley said that it would be cruel for God to build this beautiful house and then impose a laundry list of standards in order to get in it, standards that no one would ever be able to meet. So God offers the assistance that is needed. Sanctification does not happen by human effort, but by the work of God. Like everything else you have discovered around here, it is a gift, pure and simple.” I have to tell you that what I heard had really lifted my heart. After all, I had read Leviticus. While I was pretty sure I would never boil a kid in its mother’s milk, I was also pretty sure that obeying the rest of those laws would not be very easy. And that’s not even considering that whole ‘love your enemy’ stuff that is found in the gospels. It was good to know that I didn’t need to do anything to get up close and personal with God. I guess that is why they call grace amazing.

The expression on my friend’s face told me that he was once again reading my thoughts. With all that has gone on, I should have remembered. This time he caught me big time. “Hold on there, son!” he said. “You’ve got it a bit wrong. You’re missing the boat on this one. Remember how I told you that Wesley was a ‘Yes, but...’ kind of guy? He came by that honestly. He understood the way in which God works. *Yes*, God gives people the grace they need to draw closer and closer to the one who has always loved them and wants the absolute best for them, *but* that doesn’t mean that they don’t have a

role to play in the process. The Christian life consists of both a gift and a task. God works, and the Christian responds. It's sort of like your son Charlie. Do you remember when he was two and would sit on the front porch with his watercolors and paintbrush? Even then you knew something special was going on with him and in him, right? You knew he had been given a gift. But he didn't just sit on that gift, did he? No, he did things to help it to grow. From elementary school to high school to college he sought out teachers that could help him develop his gift. He basically apprenticed himself to that one portrait artist from the Delta. Now he is getting his masters and sharing his gift with others. No doubt in the years to come, he will continue on his journey of building on his gift. Can you see how that is similar to the whole process of sanctification? God gives a most amazing gift, but those who receive it have a part to play as well. That part involves continuing commitment and obedience in response to the grace that God constantly gives. It's the same with you. And in that interplay between God's gift of grace and your response of faith, you draw ever closer to God."

I liked that explanation. Of course, I liked any explanation that used my kids as examples. But that led me to a question, one in which I figured I already had half of the answer. "Okay," I asked, "I'm sure old John had a name for the role we play in the process. Go ahead and tell me. What is it?" He just laughed. "Yep, he talked about it quite a bit. He wrote quite a few pamphlets and preached a bunch of sermons that described the divine gift of sanctifying grace and the human response of sanctifying faith. We could spend hours reviewing all of that. But in order to answer your question fairly quickly, just remember the General Rules. You had to learn them when you were ordained. Remember how Bishop Minnick asked y'all what they were in front of the whole Conference?" I squirmed at that memory. "Yeah, he sort of caught us all off guard with that one." "Well, what did you say?" This time I didn't have to squirm, as I had learned my lesson quite well that day. "'Do no harm. Do good. Attend the ordinances of the church', or as they say now, 'Stay in love with God.'" My friend nodded his head. "Okay. Now in a nutshell, tell me what those three rules mean." While there is never a good way to explain the rather verbose Wesley in a nutshell, I tried my best. "'Do no harm:' don't do things that are hurtful to others. 'Do good:' live a life of love. 'Attend to

the ordinances' or 'Stay in love with God:' participate in those classic spiritual disciplines and exercises designed to *draw you closer to God*—praying, scripture reading, attending worship, doing mission work, and the like!" Once again, he nodded his head. "You're doing well. Let's keep going, now. As you do all of that, as you respond to sanctifying grace with sanctifying faith, the Holy Spirit gives you the ability to grow in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—all of those qualities that are so very different from what is usually found in the world, right? Now tell me, what do you call it when one exhibits those qualities that are different, that are set apart, from the world around them?" Only one word was needed here. "Holy," I said. "And what happens the more holy you become?" My response was very simple: "You draw closer and closer to God." Throwing his arms in the air and attempting the best Dr. Henry Higgins imitation he could muster, my friend shouted, "By George, I think he's got it!"

After a few choruses of "The Rain in Spain," we finally settled down. I finally started moving into and around the house of religion. It had sounded so difficult at first, but in reality it was so simple. Sanctification was nothing more than our continuing walk with God through life. And as we walked, I constantly move toward the closest one can ever get to God, that place which Wesley called "perfection." I was told that he used to say that Christians were "going onto perfection." I'm not sure I get that totally, so I'll let Hughes explain that to me sometime soon. After all, there's no one more perfect than him. Just ask him! Hopefully, I'll reach the goal of perfection, of entire sanctification, someday. And if I don't get there now, well, I guess I will just have to wait and get there then—if you know what I mean.

While my trip into the house of religion had ended, my journey had just begun. There were so many rooms to I needed to explore, so many places with which I had to acquaint myself—rooms and places that Wesley never even thought to name! My friend was with me wherever I went, and we were drawing closer and closer with every step we took. And because that was happening, I finally felt free enough to ask the question I had wanted to ask from the moment I first saw him walk out of the house and through the

yard. “One more thing I must ask you. You never have told me your name. But that’s okay. The scars on your wrists and the love in your heart gave you away a long time ago. But Lord, there is one thing I haven’t been able to figure out. I’ve been wondering about it for sometime now. Why the Jimmy Buffet tee shirt?” He laughed. “That’s easy. I travel down a lot of roads in order to push and nudge my children so that, hopefully, they will one day wake up in the yard of religion just like you did. One road took me to a sleepy little place called Margaritaville. And after looking for days for that lost shaker of salt, and instead of simply wasting away, I bought this tee shirt. Looks pretty good on me, don’t you think?”