

Romans 2:25-29

Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

John Wesley's sermon, "The Circumcision of the Heart"

"The Wired and Weird Mr. Wesley"

(Reflections on John Wesley)

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The men's Bible study meets at The Egg and I restaurant before the sun comes up every Friday. Mainly, we talk about the Bible. Sometimes, we talk about politics. Frequently, we talk about women. Every now and then, our conversations carry us into some area that we actually know something about, like automobile transmission oil, or the best places to fish, or Ram football. Last Friday, two of the guys were talking about airplane crashes. Two of the men were saying you can buy a map with the coordinates, and if you have a GPS, you can hike to places in the mountains where large airplanes have crashed. In fact, there are two B17 plane crashes in this area. (It may be 29, I don't know.) Not far from here. There's a debris field. Parts of the wreck are still there. They did point out that the hike up there was treacherous and difficult, and if you know what you're looking for, there is much to see. Okay, here's the analogy. Having faith is a little like walking in the mountains to see an airplane crash. It's hard to get there. It takes a lot of work to see it. And when you find it, it's almost unrecognizable, because it isn't what you thought it was. I know that's true. I know that's true for most of us. Because I've been in conversations and it's true for me.

It's true for our founder, John Wesley. We idealize him. Gerald Kennedy said Wesley lived to be 88 years old. As a child he was in poor health, he was rescued from a house fire. His dad's parsonage. But he transformed England. He preached a number of times a day, and he seemed to thrive on it. Toward the end of his life, somebody asked him what was the secret for his good health, and he said, "The main thing is, I get up every morning at 4 and I preach at 5." Now, our alarm went off at 4:30 this past Friday, and it makes me tired thinking about Wesley. One writer said that Wesley's personal influence was such that it was the greatest influence from any single gentleman in his country. And Albert Outler, who spent his life studying John Wesley, said he was the most important theologian in his century. And that's really good to know. But there's something in our nature that needs to help us see our heroes as human, not to put them down, but in fact to make them real. Blaise Pascal, the brilliant mathematician, some have speculated when he was nine years old he got into trouble with his parents because of some bad behavior,

and he was sent to his room, and while he was being punished, he invented calculus to get even. I believe that.

I don't know, there's just something about knowing that Henry Ford, when he built his first automobile, put everything into it except one thing. He put in no reverse gear. It wouldn't back up. Richard Heitzenrater wrote a book about John Wesley. He claims that the stories of Wesley are often so simple, and they have been used to reinforce a particular bias. The conservatives portray him as a pious mystic. The liberals suggest he was a radical revolutionary. Heitzenrater goes on to say, you've got to look at the different periods in his life, because he evolved. He changed. The truth is, he was elusive. The title of the book is *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, that Richard Heitzenrater wrote. A person of great faith, but consumed with doubt. A person of incredible social conscience preached a message that was heard, about the abolition of slavery. Strict application of doctrine, mixed with the ideal "we must think and let think."

But let's get real. Our founder floundered. He was wired, and he was weird. Left England to come to America, what is now the state of Georgia, to convert the natives, and realized he needed to be converted himself first. Was expelled by Governor Oglethorpe from Georgia because there was a strong spirit of anger against him. It involved a love affair, but we won't go into that. They said he was an odd mixture of a man who was a religious enthusiast, or a religious fanatic, that he was a hypocrite, that he was distasteful to the inhabitants and the prayer that he prayed to himself repeatedly was "Help, God, my unbelief." He couldn't convert others. He wasn't converted himself. He returned to England in a storm, became afraid. The Moravians told him to be still and silent, in other words sit down and shut up. He was a poor sinner, a broken-hearted man hungering for righteousness. Yes, we remember that he went to the service at Aldersgate, and the Moravian pastor was reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, and yes, his heart was strangely warmed. But we also know that he was encumbered with doubt his whole life. Toward the end of his life, he wrote a letter in code to his brother Charles, and the code was broken just a few years ago. John Wesley did not want us to know that, as he looked back at his life and all that he preached, there was much of that he doubted.

So many people we admire have been people who floundered in their faith. Mother Teresa, the diary revealed, you know, the deep doubt she had in her life, discovered after her death. She floundered in her faith. But all of us flounder. All of us from time to time become disillusioned by life. Like the guy who went to the hardware store, asked the clerk, "What is that thing?" "It's a vacuum bottle." "What does it do?" "It's a wonderful thing. It keeps hot food hot, and cold food cold." "I'll take one. Great idea." Next day, he goes to lunch at work. Co-workers around, they look at what he's got. "Yeah, it's a vacuum bottle." "What's it do?" "It keeps hot things hot and cold things cold." "What are you having for lunch today," one of them asks. He says, "I'm having chili and jello." The confusion. The disillusionment. And if you think it's impossible, Robert Fulghum in his book *What On Earth Have I Done?* recalls being an eight year old Cub Scout on his first overnight outing, and some senior scout, whom he looked up to, told him to bring cans of pork and beans. There would be no need for a cooking pot, just put the cans on the fire. Didn't mention to open the can first. The explosion scattered fire, pork and beans, and ten

scouts, and the night was spent in sleeping bags made smoky and sticky by the fallout. And Fulghum says, "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

People we look up to, see them as they are, not really so different from ourselves. James Howell, who was a United Methodist pastor in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, wrote a book called *Servants, Misfits, and Martyrs*. He writes, "The friends of God are not superhuman. They do not possess an extra layer of muscle. They are not taller. They do not sport a superior IQ. They are not richer. Their parents are not more clever than yours or mine. They are flesh and blood, just like you and I. No stronger, no more intelligent. But that's the point. Simply offer themselves, they do, to God, knowing they are not elite, and knowing sometimes, maybe most of the time, they are not adequate to the task."

Our founder floundered. He floundered in his faith. So do we. But what do we do? We do what Wesley did. It's important to know he floundered. And secondly, it's good to know how he dealt with it. Peter Buller was a British pastor in the Brethren Church. You know, that's why we're called United Methodists, because the Evangelical United Brethren Church united with the Methodist Church in 1968, so that's why we're United Methodists. So there was a relationship between the founders of these two denominations, and Peter was asked by Wesley about his doubts. Buller looked at him and said, "If you don't have faith, preach faith until you have it." Fake it till you make it.

Thomas Long, professor of homiletics, said, "My favorite church website is the one where you hit the button on the homepage that says, "What we believe." You hit that button and it goes to a page that says, "Under construction, come back later." Or Garrison Keillor, in his book *Life Among the Lutherans*, said, "Lutherans are calm and stoic modest people, haunted by guilt, fearful of looking ridiculous, so they feel secure when surrounded by people who look like they look and are doing the same things they're doing. Lutherans, generally speaking, are not the ones up on the stage. They're the ones who hand out the program to you as you come in." Lutherans fake it till they make it, and so do Methodists.

We're studying a book on the subject of doubt, Wednesday noon, it's called *Faith at the Edge*. Robert Wennberg is the author. Wennberg writes about his crisis of faith and how he was so filled with doubt that he felt totally isolated. If you've ever felt this, you know doubt consumes you, and you have a sense that no one else could possibly understand how you feel, or have those doubts. Who do you talk to? Then he made a decision. He decided to be a person of faith who had doubts, and not a doubter who had some faith. It was a decision for him. Preach faith until you believe it. Fake it until you make it.

I came across this story several years ago, it was in the early nineties. I've always wondered if I could ever put it in a sermon. We'll see. Young man hiking through West Virginia, and a farmer driving up in the old, rusted-out pickup truck stops to give him a lift. As they rode along, they got to talking about moonshine whiskey. It's West Virginia, you know. The young man said he'd never tasted moonshine, and he wasn't much of a drinker, and probably it would be too strong for him. The old farmer said, "Well, you've got to try some." He reached into the back of his pickup truck and pulled out a jug, and he

said, "Here." "No, that's okay." "No, I insist." "No thanks, really." So the farmer stopped the truck, reached around and pulled out a shotgun, and pointed the gun at the boy and said, "Take a drink, Son." So he did. It was like jet fuel. His eyes burned, his throat tightened, and he choked. "Good, ain't it," said the farmer. "I guess so," said the boy. Then the farmer reached around and took his gun and handed it to the young man and growled, "Now you hold the gun on me, and I'll take a drink." Sometimes we've got to fake it, if we're going to make it. Pretend we like it, till maybe we do. Bad analogy, except, sometimes we have to imagine there is a God before we can see there is a God.

And sometimes we have to think about the way it could be, like those children, before we can look at what it is and move it forward. Sometime, therefore, we put up banners that say "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors," because maybe some day our doors will be open in ways they aren't. Or we speak words like "Rethink church," and we begin to rethink it. What are we? What could we become? Paul the Apostle spoke of the circumcision of the heart, and what did that mean? And how did he mean it? Paul urged people to vision whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is generous, if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, think on those things. Paul had a thorn in his flesh. He was flawed, but he preached faith until he had it, and he faked it till he made it, and a bright light hit him on the road to Damascus.

William Arthur Ward wrote, "I am more than happy, I'm joyful. I'm more than healthy, I'm whole. More than alive, I'm radiant. More than caring, I'm loving. More than interested, I'm involved. More than adequate, I'm triumphant. More than human, I am a child of God." If we say it often, it becomes our truth. If we work on what is in fact, we will make truth what we know in principle. We're a sinner on the way to being a saint. We are forlorn, on the way to being reformed. We're broken, on the way to being re-glued. We're pathetic, on the way to being prophetic. We are woman, hear us roar, where it used to be a whisper. We're superman, able to reach tall buildings in a single bound, faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive. When they shoot bullets at us, they do not penetrate, and when they throw the gun at us, we duck. We preach faith until we have it, like our founder, we flounder.

And then, thirdly, one of the most interesting thoughts he had, perfection, then we get it. And then we let it go. To God. Moving on to perfection. Cecelie Berry is a writer. She wrote these words, "When I was young, I thought confidence would be earned with perfection. Now I know you don't have to earn it, you claim it." Wesley called it grace. He thought it was a gift. He thought it came from God. And then we get it, and then we let it go to God. That sermon that Wesley wrote, that Rebecca read this morning, it was preached first at Oxford, January 1, 1733, he kept that sermon. He had this thing, he would say, "I burn my sermons every seven years, because it's too bad if I can't write a better one than I wrote seven years ago." But he kept that sermon. He never changed that sermon. He preached that sermon over and over again. It was all that he taught. It was all that he preached, it was all that he thought, it all wrapped up into that one sermon. It was how we get it, and how we let it go to God. Let the spirit return to God, who gave it, with the whole train of its affections, Wesley said. Let your heart be filled with so entire a love

of God, that there is nothing else you seek, but for God's sake. Perfection, moving toward it.

I think our biggest sin, our worst mistake, is we think too small. Or we fail to risk, because we're afraid to fail. It's like the Chicago Cub pitcher, in the bottom of the ninth, threw a pitch to Cincinnati Reds Barry Larkin, for a walk-off grand slam home run, Cubs lose. Afterwards, they ask the pitcher about that pitch, and he said "It was a cross between a screwball and a changeup, let's just call it a screwup." We move on, or we run away. We move forward towards something special. We can claim defeat and hang our heads, or we can pick up the pieces and wait for the next opportunity. We can move on because we screwed up, or having screwed up, we can hold our chin up, prepared to step up to the plate. When the roll is called up yonder, we'll be there. We can move on by being better, or mope around becoming bitter. We can look for the best and become it, and join in with God in the confident truth that we are moving on to something great. We can turn it loose. We let it go to God, because at the end of the day, there really isn't much we can do. But there is much we can start, and a good bit of that can't be stopped. At the end of faith, there is the potential we can barely see, yet we have no control if we let it go and let God and know that whatever we are, whatever we were, we are not finished. God is not through yet.

I'm reminded of Gertrude Stein, who was having her portrait painted by Pablo Picasso, and when it was finished, she looked at it and she didn't like it, and said to him, "It doesn't look like me," and the famous painter looked at her and said, "It will." Whatever is, whatever will be, God knows. What ever we are, what are we becoming? We don't make predictions, we don't use a crystal ball. We don't issue forecasts. But we live by the promise of a God who has repeatedly said, "You ain't seen nothin' yet." And we live by the potential of that anonymous God, speaking to all of us about God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. The time has come for us to open Pandora's Box, otherwise we will die of good taste. The time has come for us to learn that the greatest sin is to seek to be safe, and become prematurely old, than it is to live on the cusp of something new and be everlastingly immature. We can't move on to perfection if we keep looking over our shoulder at the old scripts. God can't do much with us if we think we've arrived, or if we are convinced that there is no God, or is no good. Just narcissism and the need to control the creative spirit. That doesn't work. Just negativism cast in something that sounds profound, but is just plain lazy. It takes courage to hope. We can pretend we have no doubt, that we are some kind of immaculate exception. Or we can fake faith until we make it, preach faith until we have it. And then we get it, and then we let it go, and let God move us toward perfection. Otherwise, we're a plane crash in the mountains, and the only way to find us is with a GPS and when they find us, after a long hike, there's really not much of us left. Our founder floundered. He was weird, but he was wired. To God. And so are we, and that's why they still call us Wesleyan Methodists.