

Uncharted Courses

To us it seems perfectly normal; it is the way the story goes. Yet in its day and time, in their day and time, it was radical. Lives spent in study were rare unto themselves. Yet for a handful of the studious ones to set off on a journey, a journey with an uncharted course, a journey where the best route could not be determined, the cost could not be counted because the destination was unknown, was astounding.

There is much that is not known about these travelers -- some assumptions but little cold, hard facts. There was more than one, though the exact number is not named. Their gifts indicate wealth, though nothing is recorded which gives insight into whether the gifts were sacrificial or surface level giving for those wise ones. We all know that what is costly depends as much on the available resources as on the price itself.

Their journey had its effect, seen in the telling of the story throughout the ages, even to this day. Yet the effect of the journey on the travelers is untold. They followed a star, sought a king, worshiped, gave and returned. Yet what they returned to we do not know. Did they return to questions, scorn, disappointments; to further explorations or to contentment and satisfaction? Was this a pivotal journey in their lives, in their faith, or just one of many, wanting to see the latest “newest thing”?

Methodist, Wesleyan – they are main stream words, not edgy, not challenging, settled and safe. Yet the Wesley brothers, John and Charles and the then movement now denomination, which bears the name “Methodist” echo a call to live in radical ways, transformative and challenging, to self and others.

John Wesley started a movement of practical piety. He dedicated his well-ordered intellect, self-discipline and high energy to intense religious activity aimed at renewing the Church of England. It was not his aim, not his destination to begin another branch of the Christian church. What Wesley desired was for those who made up the church to be the church, the body of Christ in the world they resided in. John Wesley took strongly to the call of Christ to care for the poor, needy, and imprisoned. A man far ahead of his time in his thinking, Wesley acts on the conviction that the Gospel is for the whole person and the whole human race, a vision that resulted in the founding of dispensaries for the sick, homes for orphans, schools for persons who were poor, visits to prisoners, opposition to slavery, and the publishing of numerous materials.

Wesley traveled over 250,000 miles in his lifetime as he spread the Gospel. The influence of his persuasive preaching and organizational abilities lead to the creation of Methodist bands, classes, and societies in England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and the American colonies. The United Methodist Church is one of the denominations which is part of the legacy of John Wesley, yet John’s life journey was nothing like what was expected. The Wesley family had a tradition of serving as clergy. John’s father,

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2008

Samuel Wesley, was a descendant of an old English aristocratic line and Rector at Epworth. It was from him that John inherited a strong and independent character. It was his mother, Susannah, who instilled in him a strong faith and devotion to God.

At Oxford John was instrument in the development of the "holiness club", where he and other young men strove to live faithfully by deliberately or methodically studying Greek and the New Testament together. They fasted Wednesdays and Fridays. The money they saved was used for their good works, which covered a variety of things such as visiting the prisoners and freeing some from debtor's jail, teaching prisoners, furnishing books on Christianity, caring for the sick and needy in the town, and giving free tuition to poor children, who otherwise had no education.

As young men, John and his brother Charles, felt called to journey to Georgia as missionaries to the Indians for the Anglican church. Many things didn't go right in America and John returned to England discouraged and intending to give up preaching. However, he met Peter Böhler, a member of the German Moravian Brethren, who encouraged him to *"Preach faith 'til you have it, and then because you have it, you will preach faith."*

This encouragement, coupled with John's experience at Oxford with affected his preaching in a great way. He preached twice a day, sometimes three or four times, and it is estimated that he traveled almost five thousand miles a year, mostly on horseback. During his career, he crossed the Irish Sea 42 times. John preached more than 40,000 sermons, but his simple, yet challenging, message offended many parish ministers, who banned him from their pulpits. The Anglican Churches closed their doors to him.

On April 2, 1739, John Wesley preached before approximately three thousand people on a small hill outside Bristol, proclaiming the glad tidings of salvation. A new era in the religious history of England started on this date. Wesley's preaching had a deep influence on the hearts of the people. He spoke so simply that all ordinary people were able to understand him. Wesley took to preaching in the fields, a practice which his capable contemporary George Whitefield had successfully pioneered. Wesley set out on horseback to preach wherever he could find an audience. Wesley traveled back and forth between Bristol and London, the centers of the Methodist Revival.

This Methodist Revival is credited with saving England from undergoing the bloody social revolutions experienced by many of their neighboring countries. It was anything but main stream, anything but the socially acceptable. There was no indication that John had any indication as to where his travels or his journey of faith would ultimately lead him. We know that John Wesley never returned to the genteel sermons which satisfied, or sedated, the middle and upper classes which populated the church, and that one of his greatest fears was that the people known as Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. "But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will

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be the case unless they hold fast to the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

We begin the New Year, naming those to whom leadership will be entrusted. The roles and titles speak to the work to be done, finance, stewardship, worship, nurture, witness, administration, trustees. Most of us have heard these terms many times, we know who to seek out if we have a question or concern regarding the facilities and equipment, regarding the ministry and mission, regarding our living and serving together. Most who have accepted leadership roles have ideas, thoughts and stirrings of what impact they might make. Some feel ill equipped to follow in the footsteps of the one who served so faithfully before. Yet I pray that each of them knows that he or shee, as we, are setting out on a journey as uncharted and unknown, as radical and life changing, as dangerous and costly, as those wise ones of long ago and as life altering and culturally shifting as the faith journey of the Wesley brothers.

Leadership in the church is not about what we do, leadership in the church is about who and whose we are. It is not about fulfilling the duties listed in the Book of Discipline or meeting the expectations of others. It is about placing our lives, and this church, radically in the hands of God. It is about studying “our stars”, knowing and learning all that we can, then travelling beyond knowing into trusting God and God alone.

It is about a recommitment to being “Methodist” to accepting that call to practical piety, to knowing that salvation comes through faith and faith alone, yet that same faith creates and molds hearts and lives which give, share and serve, not for our sakes but for the sake of others.

There will be much of our story which will not be known by those who come after us. Our names and number might become blurred, our individual journeys and preferences lost in the river of time. Yet there will be stories shared of our travelling through 2008, of our willingness to be radically faithful, of our understanding that all things may change and nothing is beyond the touch and transformation of God. Yet if we spend this year doing the expected, pressing on, counting costs but never moving forward, there will be no story to tell. The stories that live on are the stories which can only seem normal once time has passed and God’s fingerprints can be seen by those looking, and wondering, about why and what led us to do the radical, Godly things we will be called to.

When today, and this new year is history, will we be seen as “wise ones” or wild ones, will we be seen as those who so desired to worship the king that we were willing to travel afar? Will we preach, in word yet more so in living, that which is easy to hear or that which everyone can hear and understand. Will we be faithful followers of that which will lead us on the great uncharted course which is the will and way of God?