Introduction: The Root of the Issue

Roots. They are everywhere. Under the ground all around us, crisscrossing through dirt, cracking sidewalks, moving aside rocks and pipes, constantly spreading, reaching, growing. They are absolutely necessary for life. The life of all plants, anyway. Plants, which, in turn, give us food, clean air, shelter, medicine, tools—all things that are essential for our life. Although they are often unseen, and usually discarded for the seemingly more valuable part of the plant, they are crucial to our existence.

Roots perform a few key functions that support life on this planet.

- They anchor a plant in place. So no matter what forces might act upon the plant above ground, the roots keep the plant stable and connected to its source.
- They store nutrients and energy to support ongoing life for plants (just think, carrots are roots that have all the good stuff of the plant!), so much so that even when a tree is cut down or burned, all is not always lost and the roots can still produce a new shoot.
- They absorb and deliver the nutrients and water that sustain the plant and make it grow. The roots are the conduit for life.

All of this is why roots grow first, before ever a plant sends up a shoot. Without the root, the plant could never grow, and it only keeps growing because of its root.

If we move from the biological to the figurative, all of this could be said for our own roots. Those things that come first and then anchor us, that supply us with what is necessary for life, those things that are maybe unseen but are none the less influential on how we live, what we believe, and how we understand the world around us. When we consider our roots, it helps us to understand our current perspective, experiences, and outlooks. It helps us to understand us. Think of your physical body. When something goes wrong, one of the steps doctors take is to try to look at what might have come first, at where we came from, what are those things that are maybe unseen, part of our past, but that influence our health today. Even if something isn’t wrong, it’s important to know where we came from and what is deep within us, so that we can know ourselves better.

Our faith has roots, and when we look at those roots, we can more deeply understand our beliefs, our practices, and most importantly our relationship with God today.

The ancient Israelites and the first Christians understood this explicitly. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, the people are reminded of where they came from, of what
God had done for them, of their roots as people of God, no matter what was happening to them at the time. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses says to the people: “Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children...Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God. ... When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Deut. 4:9; 8:11-14)

In his letter to the Romans in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul reminds the new converts to Christianity, those people who now have access to the roots of the faith from the very beginning, not to take that for granted. He even uses the analogy of roots when he says, “Remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.” (Romans 11:18)

As God’s people have always done, we must remember the roots of our faith, not so that we remain trapped in the past, but so that our present and our future can be anchored, sustained, and nourished regardless of the times in which we live.

Alexander Bucksch, a biologist who studies root growth, claims in a recent article, "What we can learn now is how plants change to meet their environment. What things have worked in the past for the plant is reflected in the angle, the branching and the dynamics of its root system." When we look at plant roots, we can not only see how they support the life of a plant, but by looking specifically at how the roots grow, we can understand what the plant might have gone through (drought, flooding, more or less exposure to sun, etc.) and how the plant adapted and changed in order to survive. -

http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/first-direct-observations-of-how-roots-grow/

Not only do we remember our roots as Christians, but even more specifically we look to our United Methodist roots in order to understand our place in the Christian landscape of the day. That is what we are doing with this series. What was the situation that led to a change, an adaptation, and a unique identity? If we look at our roots, will we be able to understand how it is that a movement called Methodism started with just a few young people who believed their church and their nation needed a revival, a renewal, and a spiritual awakening? And not just started, but survived and thrived. We will see how the values that gave life to the early Methodist movement carry on today, and how by tapping back into our roots, we might find renewed life in them ourselves.
Root One: Mission over Model

Opening Questions:

- Who has had the greatest influence in your life?
- Are you a person who invites change or approaches change kicking and screaming?
  Why?
- What is your mission in life? (“I don’t know” is an acceptable answer!)

As United Methodists, our roots go back to the 17th and 18th centuries in England, more specifically, to the life of a man named John Wesley and all the people, events, and places he experienced.

John Wesley was born on June 17, 1703, one of 17 children of Samuel and Susanna Wesley. Samuel was the rector or lead pastor of the parish in Epworth, England, serving in St. Andrew’s Church. Susanna ran the household, educating her children and raising them in the faith. John, his sisters and his younger brother Charles, were preacher’s kids — John was baptized in the church as an infant, received communion, heard his father preach, and practiced the faith of the Church of England.

Now for a quick history lesson. The Church of England experienced a rocky history by the time John was born. King Henry VIII had declared himself the head of the church in England instead of the pope, and over the next two hundred years the church was pulled back and forth between the protestant reformers in England and those loyal to the church in Rome. Hundreds of people were martyred for their faith, and much of those left were dissatisfied with the church, either thinking the reform to the church went too far, or not far enough.

In 1662, English Parliament passed the Act of Uniformity, which stated that all churches within the Church of England had to conform to one uniform liturgy, including prayers, sacraments, rites and doctrines presented in the Book of Common Prayer. If a clergy person refused to conform, they were expelled from the Church of England, and referred to as non-conformists. If they had held an official position in the Church, they had to relinquish that position, and further (due to other acts passed at the same time) were prevented from holding public office, teaching in schools, being awarded degrees from university, meeting together with more than 5 people of different families, and from even going within 5 miles of their former parish. Still, over 2000 clergy refused to take the oath and left their calling in order to be true to what they believed was the right way to practice their faith.
All four of John Wesley’s grandparents were non-conformists who thought the Church of England was still too Catholic and refused to fall in line with its decrees, but both of his parents were committed to the Church tradition and liturgy. His mother and father supported the crown, and supported the Church of England. They were educated and sophisticated; yet, possibly because of the impact of their parents, were also influenced by a rise of pietism and deeply committed to Christian morality and discipline.

Susanna Wesley, John’s mother, was responsible for influencing her children as much as their father was. She was educated, something unusual for women of the time. And she insisted that all of her daughters in addition to her sons be educated. She also took responsibility for much of the spiritual development of her family, even if was informal. She led the family in a devotional time each week in their home, around their kitchen table.

A famous story goes that once, when Samuel was away for a period of time in London and a substitute preacher’s sermons weren’t... as appreciated... by the congregation, people began attending Susanna’s devotional in her home. The substitute preacher wrote to Samuel complaining, and Samuel wrote to Susanna asking her to stop preaching and teaching to the congregation. Susanna responded “If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment, for neglecting this opportunity of doing good, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.” We have no subsequent record of Samuel ever writing back to give her any such command, in this case landing on the right side of history and of his wife!

Throughout his life, John Wesley’s mother encouraged him in his faith, his discipline, and in a practical faith. Her own faithful devotion, in her prayers, scripture study, and practices of the faith, contributed to John’s understanding of what a Christian life should look like, and the ongoing inspiration of his mother is seen at many different places throughout his life, the least of which is that he had her buried in London across from the first Methodist Chapel built. Samuel, John’s father, had an obvious and regular influence on his son’s life and faith experience by preaching and leading the community in worship. But additionally, he modeled a faith that went beyond the walls of the parish church.

He gathered a small group of people and set up a religious society in Epworth. These types of societies existed throughout England and Europe with a declared motive to “promote real holiness of heart and life.” To prevent them from being considered non-conformist groups, they were always rooted in the Church of England, under the authority of a local priest, and intended to enhance and complement the practice of the church. The group in Epworth, under Samuel Wesley’s leadership, met regularly and held formal meetings (with notes, including
lists of members) and focused on Christian education. They would read theological works, engage in Bible study, work with and advocate for the poor both economically and spiritually, and hold each other accountable to living out moral disciplines.

What is clear is that John Wesley was much influenced by both of his parents, who were willing to go beyond one particular way of doing things in order to be faithful to what God was calling them to do: his mother by leading people in devotion to God in a time when women were not allowed to do so, his father by taking the spiritual direction of his congregation to the next level by creating and organizing a way for people to grow in their faith as far outside the bounds of the church as legally possible.

What’s equally clear, is that Wesley was influenced by the religious climate in which he was born. He knew both sides of grandparents gave up their positions in the Church of England to be true to their mission. He knew there was an underlying desire for deep piety and morality, even as society as a whole seemed to become more and more disinterested in religious practice. If John Wesley was ever going to lead a revival in the Church of England at this time, it would only be because he would stay true to his mission of faith over any model of religion.

This is not something that began with John Wesley, although his embracing it directly influences us today. Jesus constantly challenged religious norms of his day, calling people to a mission that couldn’t be contained by the religion of the time. In Matthew 5, Jesus makes a series of statements that begin with him saying to the crowd, “You have heard it said…” and continue with him saying, “But I say to you…” Whether it’s about anger, or retaliation or loving our enemies, Jesus takes the mission of God and places it over the standard religious practice of the day. Even though the religion of his day claimed to be true to God’s desires, Jesus revealed how far it had drifted, that people had become more invested in maintaining the model of how religion was to be practiced and had failed to use the model merely to serve the mission of God. Jesus called the leaders of the temple, and anyone who heard his words, to open their hearts to what God was trying to do in their lives and in the world, even if it meant changing how they had done things for centuries.

Clearly, Jesus Christ influenced John Wesley more than anything else in being true to God’s mission than any particular model of Church. Later in his life, when he had riled up so many people with his sermons, challenging people to embrace a more enthusiastic faith, that he was barred from preaching in most pulpits, Wesley began preaching outside the church walls, even though that was unheard of for a clergy in the Church of England.

Richard P. Heitzenrater, in his book, Wesley and the People Called Methodists, says, “The implication is clear. Wesley felt that his calling as well as his ordination made it necessary for
him to disregard parish boundaries and normal parish protocol in his attempts to fulfill God’s commission to him to preach the Gospel.”

Wesley, beginning at an early age, and continuing throughout his life, experienced God’s power when he stayed more true to his mission then his model. This understanding became one of the roots of the Methodist movement, and as United Methodists, it is still true for us today. We are called to always respond to our God given mission to make disciples, and do whatever it takes, even if that means changing our model to do it.

“I look upon the world as my parish” – John Wesley

_Hymn 339: Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast_, Charles Wesley, 1747

_Come, sinners, to the gospel feast; let every soul be Jesus’ guest. Ye need not one be left behind, for God hath bid all humankind._

_Sent by my Lord, on you I call; the invitation is to all. Come, all the world! Come, sinner, thou! All things in Christ are ready now._

_Come, all ye souls by sin oppressed, ye restless wanderers after rest; ye poor, and maimed, and halt, and blind, in Christ a hearty welcome find._

_My message as from God receive; ye all may come to Christ and live. O let his love your hearts constrain, nor suffer him to die in vain._

_This is the time, no more delay! This is the Lord’s accepted day. Come thou, this moment, at his call, and live for him who died for all._

**Reflection Questions:**

- John Wesley’s parents played a significant role in rooting him in his beliefs, his spiritual practices, and his faith in general. Who are the people who have rooted you?
- What did they share with you that has kept you anchored in your faith?
- If you have a good sense of your mission in life, how did you determine this as your mission? Who helped you establish this mission?
- If you are unsure of your mission in life, what do you think it will take for you to establish your mission? To whom can you go for assistance in establishing this mission?
- Can you identify a time in your life when you have had to change your course of action in order to accomplish a goal, task or job?
- Are you the type of person who strictly adheres to rules or believes rules are merely guidelines?
• Based on the ideas of Matthew 5, have there been religious beliefs, concepts, and/or practices you have changed in order to better align yourself with the mission of God?
• How did these changes affect your faith?
• Now that you are more deeply rooted, how do you hope to grow this week?
Roots: Discovering the Story of John Wesley and Methodism

Root Two: Head AND Heart

Opening Questions:

- What do you think of when you think about college?
- Has your faith consisted primarily of head (intellectual) experiences or heart (emotional) experiences?
- Has your primary experience (head or heart) changed throughout the course of your life?

The environment of a plant influences the growth of a plant a great deal. External pressures, situations, and experiences influence our lives as well. But plants whose roots are strong can weather many storms, and can adapt and survive what comes their way. As John Wesley continues to rely on his roots in the face of many external pressures, he develops a position that will become an essential root, which strengthens what is now the Methodist movement throughout its history.

The religious landscape of early 18th century England consisted of large numbers of sects and theological perspectives that claimed the right way to do church and religion. While many grew tired of religious fanaticism, there was a rising interest in pietism, Christian morality and discipline.

In the midst of this volatile religious landscape, John Wesley, like many emerging adults of today, left home at the age of 17 to begin his university studies. A child of educated parents, John attended Christ Church, one of the most prestigious colleges of Oxford University in Oxford, England. John’s university experience was pretty normal. He studied, made new friends, participated in various activities. He lived the typical college life.

However, upon completing his bachelor’s degree, John’s life began to drastically change. In 1726, he was elected as a Fellow (or professor) of Lincoln College, then just eight months later he received his master’s degree. Soon after John left Oxford to serve as curate (or associate pastor) to his father in Epworth. Following years of studying at Oxford, his time in Epworth gave him practical experience ministering and preaching to a congregation. These proved to be tasks he enjoyed and would continued to enjoy throughout the life of his ministry.

While at Oxford, John’s decision to become a Fellow in Lincoln College also meant he would pursue ordination. Ordination was typical of Fellows at Oxford, but this also came at the encouragement of his parents. It was also his parents who advised John to focus on Christian living, rather than just the study thereof, as he prepared for ordination. Thus, as early as 1725 John began to experience a desire for holiness. This desire led him to structure
his time and discipline himself in study and in Christian spiritual practices as he sought to fulfill the greatest and first commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” (Matthew 22:37-38).

As John’s desire for holiness continued to develop as a Fellow at Oxford, his younger brother, Charles, also began his studies at Christ Church. Upon his arrival, Charles did not subscribe to the serious form of religion his brother had adopted. However, in 1729, when John was serving as curate in Epworth, Charles wrote to John expressing his desire for a spiritual renewal similar to that which John had experienced while at Oxford.

Charles viewed his brother as a model Christian and regularly appealed to him for advice on what to do, what to read, and even how to keep a journal (a practice John had personally implemented years before and would continue throughout his life). Like his brother, Charles’ spiritual renewal led him to personal engagement of the spiritual disciplines, but it also led him to explore this renewal with his friends at Oxford.

As Charles and his friends continued to meet informally, John decided to return to Oxford to teach. During the fall of 1730 John began to meet regularly with Charles and his friends to discuss the Oxford curriculum, which consisted of the classics as well as divinity. Thus, as they engaged their minds in arduous academic studies at one of the premier universities in all of England, they also engaged their minds in rigorous theological studies.

Though there were other study and informal religious groups throughout the university, the Wesleys’ group developed a distinguishable identity, that set them apart from others. They did so by engaging in academia, disciplined spiritual practices and increased focus on serving the poor, the prisoners, and the needy of the community. They regularly visited and provided for the people in the city jail, taught orphans, and even organized enough to hire a woman to teach impoverished children. To these charitable acts they added the increased devotional practices of fasting, early rising, frugality, and praying.

It was this combination of charitable acts and devotional practices that earned this group the title of ‘Holy Club,’ a name John was none too fond of as it sounded too much like a social club. It was however, meant as an insult, and more and more, this small group of young adults, who were figuring out how to understand, experience and express their faith, were made fun of by other fellows and their peers for their attempt to be “too virtuous.” (Another epithet used to mock them was the term “Methodist.” That one, John Wesley actually commandeered and began to use himself.) These experiences, supplemented by deep study of the early church and scriptures such as Acts 2:42, that described the behavior of the believers: “They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teachings and fellowship, to the
breaking of bread and the prayers,” influenced Wesley’s theological development and organizational structure, just as a plant is influenced by its environment.

While at Oxford, Wesley was given many opportunities to preach at St. Mary’s Church in Oxford. St. Mary’s was the University church where official religious services were held as well as weekly worship for all in the university. One of his particularly noteworthy sermons came in 1733, when he preached “The Circumcision of the Heart.” Based on Romans 2:29, he defended himself (and the newly termed “Methodists”) from accusations, resulting from his focus on piety and acts of charity, that he believed salvation could be earned by doing good works. Wesley proclaimed the identity of a follower of Christ is something that happens in the heart and in the soul, and is then played out in acts of faith and piety, rather than the other way around. He went on to emphasize that faith is a personal, inward holiness that cannot help but be revealed in acts of love, service, and devotion.

His final time preaching at St. Mary’s Church came in 1744. Rather than defending his beliefs, this sermon was a scathing indictment of the leaders and other Fellows of the University as not “truly Christian.” He defined Christianity not as a set of opinions or a system of doctrines, but as something that plays out in people’s hearts and lives. Wesley challenged his hearers to search their hearts and asked:

“Do ye, brethren, abound in the fruits of the Spirit, in lowliness of mind, in self-denial and mortification, in seriousness and composure of spirit, in patience, meekness, sobriety, temperance; and in unwearied, restless endeavours to do good in every kind unto all men, to relieve their outward wants, and to bring their souls to the true knowledge and love of God? Is this the general character of Fellows of Colleges?”

He immediately answered his own question, “I fear it is not.”

He had challenged the people listening to him as being deficit in their faith because they’re hearts did not seem to be in it. They might attend worship services, read their bibles, or recite the proper prayers, but they were simply going through the motions, without being connected to what was happening, or really, what God’s Spirit was doing, in their hearts and souls. Needless to say, John Wesley was never again invited to preach at St. Mary’s Church at Oxford.

Throughout his time at Oxford, both when he was exploring his faith as a student and a young Fellow, and when he was older and a leader in the midst of a revival within the Church, John Wesley experienced a connection of intellect and emotion. At one of the greatest centers of learning in the world, his heart was stirred and his soul was moved. And rather than trying to
keep the two separate, he embraced the tension between the head and heart, between the rational and relational.

Guided by what Jesus said was the first and greatest commandment, John Wesley instilled the tension of loving God with heart, soul and mind in the Methodist movement. Today, United Methodists are still rooted in both spiritual experience and thoughtful reasoning. This is not a place where we have to check our brains at the door, but where we are encouraged to ask questions, to grow in knowledge and in grace.

_Hymn 501, O Thou Who Camest from Above_

_O Thou who camest from above, the pure celestial fire to impart kindle a flame of sacred love upon the mean altar of my heart._

_There let it for thy glory burn with inextinguishable blaze, and trembling to its source return, in humble prayer and fervent praise._

_Jesus, confirm my heart’s desire to work and speak and think for thee; still let me guard the holy fire, and still stir up thy gift in me._

_Ready for all thy perfect will, my acts of faith and love repeat, till death thy endless mercies seal, and make my sacrifice complete._

**Reflection Questions:**

- What was your faith experience during your college age years?
- Do you typically act your way into thinking or think your way into acting?
- Compare and contrast having a religion of the head with having a religion of the heart?
- Can you think of examples that have emphasized one at the expense of the other.
- When, where and how have you experienced a balance of both?
- If you’re being honest do you value one over the other? Which do you prefer?
- What spiritual practices do you participate in to love God with your head? With your heart?
- Now that you are more deeply rooted, how do you hope to grow this week?
Root Three: The Reality of Grace

Opening Questions:

- What is your greatest fear?
- Have you ever experienced something that drastically changed your beliefs, practices or life in general?
- Do you believe God loves you?
- What assures you of this love?

The primary purpose of the root is to support the life of the plant. If the roots are weak, damaged or detached from the plant, the plant will not be able to survive. But even more, if there is no sustenance for the plant, no water, no nutrients, no minerals, the roots will be useless. As much as roots are essential for life, they do not provide the essentials for life. John Wesley began to realize this was the same for his faith. His dedication to his mission over his model, his placing importance on both the head and the heart when it came to a relationship with God, those were both life supporting roots of his faith (and of the United Methodist Church). But, he realized that if he wasn’t tapping into the true source of life, God’s undeserved, unearned, unexplainable grace, then the others wouldn’t do him much good on their own. His pursuit of grace develops another root of the Methodist movement, and of our church today.

By this time in his life, still a young Fellow at Oxford, John Wesley was pursuing a rigorous spiritual routine. He adhered to strict behaviors such as not cutting his hair so he could give the money he would have spent on haircuts to the poor, rising early every day to pray and read scripture, fasting twice a week, and taking communion often, sometimes daily. As much as he argued these actions came from a holiness of heart, he often struggled with his faith. On the outside, he seemed the model of a true Christian, someone who others would make fun of for being too virtuous. But on the inside, he still felt like something was missing. As much as he knew that God’s grace was a free gift, he often acted as if it was something he needed to earn.

Wesley’s faith struggles peaked when he answered a call to be a missionary to the newest American colony of Georgia, something his father had wanted to do, but failed to accomplish before his death. During preparation for his trip John wrote a letter to a friend explaining his motivation, “My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul. I hope to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ… A right faith will, I trust, by the mercy of God, open the way for a right practice.”
Rather than learning the “true sense of the gospel of Christ” during the treacherous three-month sail to Georgia, John learned he feared death and lacked assurance for salvation. On January 26, 1736 his journal narrates the worst of the storms during his journey. Wesley reported that when the mainsail was torn, the sea crashed over the deck of the ship and all aboard feared the boat was on its way to the bottom of the ocean.

When the storm struck John Wesley was at an evening service led by German Moravians who were also journeying to the new colonies. The German Moravians were a religious group who emphasized piety and mission work, but these characteristics were not what caught the attention of Wesley. Instead, when the storm hit, the English passengers began screaming in fear while the Moravians continued to sing calmly. While Wesley feared for his life, he was impressed by the calm assurance of the Moravians, even in the face of death. Due to his fear of death and subsequent lack of assurance of God’s grace, Wesley was convinced he had never truly experienced God’s saving power (a conclusion he would question later in his life as his faith continued to evolve).

Regrettably for Wesley, the journey across the ocean was merely foreshadowing for how the Georgia mission would play out as a whole. Though it is often portrayed as a failed mission, since nothing seemed to go as planned, the experience was not all bad. Both John and his brother Charles, who accompanied him on this mission, refined their perspectives on theology and mission based on the practical experience they received in the mission field. John arrived in Georgia eager to preach and share the Good News for the first time with the local Native Americans, whom he assumed were uncorrupted by the world. John was disappointed to find out French, Spanish and English traders had preceded him leaving the locals distressed and confused about the Christian faith.

Even amidst his disappointment, John found success in his preaching and parish work. Though many viewed his eager pursuit of holiness as ostracizing, worship attendance steadily grew during his time in the colonies. Other successes included the church in America publishing the first English hymnbook, which consisted of hymns John and Charles had published. And, the first official Methodist meeting in America took place in June of 1737 in the new settlement of Frederica.

These glimmers of hope were overcast by many unfortunate events. Charles’ health quickly declined causing him to leave Georgia and return to England less than half a year after they had arrived. Nevertheless, John stayed in Georgia to carry out the mission. In the midst of his parish work, John developed a relationship with a woman whom he considered courting, but while she was encouraging his attention, she married another man. John, emotionally hurt and embarrassed by the situation, refused to serve her communion, which resulted in a
lawsuit indicting him on ten accounts of maladministration and malfeasance. With the threat of a trial in his future John fled from Georgia and returned to England by the end of 1737.

John returned to England not only feeling like a failure, but also still questioning his state of salvation, as indicated by his journal from January of 1738. He began to yearn for the assurance he had witnessed from his Moravian friends. Though he desired a faith that assured him, “my sins are forgiven and I am reconciled to God,” he could not believe he would ever have a level of faith that rid him of doubt, fear and sin. According to Richard Heitzenrater, it was Peter Boehler, a Moravian and friend of John, who “encouraged him to continue preaching faith until he actually received an assurance of it within himself, which the Moravians claimed would be accompanied by complete love, peace, and joy.”

This is precisely what both John and Charles Wesley did. They preached faith, and on Pentecost Sunday 1738, Charles had an experience of suddenly believing God loved and forgave him, and he found peace. This momentarily brought greater depression to John, but three days later while attending a society meeting on Aldersgate Street, John had an experience he attributed to the Holy Spirit. Using language that reflected Moravian theology, John described the experience saying, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

Following his religious experience, John Wesley became fascinated by the religious experiences of others as well. Throughout the life of his ministry he continued to investigate, study and work out how God’s grace could be evident in one’s life. Was it possible to respond to and grow in grace? And could fear really be cast out by the assurance of God’s love and grace “for even me”?

As he struggled with those questions, one thing was now certain: God’s grace was real and something he no longer just knew about, but had experienced. When the grace of God is experienced, rather than just something one knows about, fear is replaced with love, for “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear,” (1 John 4:18).

In the midst of his fascination with religious experience, Wesley still viewed reason and intellect as authoritative for understanding God. And though reason would remain a crucial part of Wesley’s theology, following Aldersgate he believed one experience was “worth a thousand reasons.” Now, more than just being able to reason about and know God’s grace, it was something that could be experienced, and Wesley could say that for sure. The Aldersgate experience finally rooted Wesley in the true source of life: God’s grace. And that allowed the reality of grace to become a root that anchored and sustained his theology, his ministry, and, ultimately, the Methodist movement around the world.
Hymn 183: Jesu, Thy Boundless Love for Me

Jesu, thy boundless love to me no thought can reach, no tongue declare;  
O knit my thankful heart to thee and reign without a rival there.  
Thine wholly, thine alone, I am; be thou alone my constant flame.

O grant that nothing in my soul may dwell, but thy pure love alone!  
O may thy love possess me whole, my joy, my treasure, and my crown.  
Strange flames far from my soul remove, my every act, word, thought, be love.

O Love, how cheering is thy ray! All pain before thy presence flies!  
Care, anguish, sorrow, melt away where'er thy healing beams arise.  
O Jesu, nothing may I see, nothing hear, feel, or think, but thee!

In suffering be thy love my peace, in weakness be thy love my power;  
and when the storms of life shall cease, Jesu, in that important hour,  
in death as life be thou my guide, and save me, who for me hast died.

Reflection Questions:

- Why do you think people fear death? Is it a lack of faith and/or assurance?
- Who is somebody who plays a substantial role in your faith development?
- How does this person influence you and how do you deal with situations, ideas or beliefs which you do not agree?
- Do you have a hard time accepting grace? Why or why not?
- At what point has God’s grace become an experience rather than just something about which you know?
- What is your initial response when you hear about (or see) people having a religious experience? Why is this your initial response?
- Give an example of something you believed to be true based on learned information, but became true to you once you experienced it.
- Wesley’s “failures” during his trip to Georgia lead to a unique experience of grace and assurance of salvation. Do you believe we have to fail in order to not only know, but fully experience grace?
- When, where and how do you experience grace?
- Now that you are more deeply rooted, how do you hope to grow this week?
Root Four: Personal AND Social Holiness

Opening Questions:

- Have you ever been annoyed by a preacher? What annoyed you?
- When you view the world today, what breaks your heart?
- What does it mean to be holy?

A quick reminder about root biology: the environment in which a plant lives effects its roots. If a plant goes through a drought, we can see that in the growth and development of the root system. In other words, by studying the roots, we can learn something about what the plant itself experienced.

So, likewise for us, when we look at the roots of our church, we can see the direct connections to experiences of the early Methodist movement, and especially the experiences of John Wesley.

John Wesley’s experience of grace at the Aldersgate meeting was a life-changing moment. One could almost, and he often did, look at his life in two sections: before Aldersgate, and after Aldersgate. He went so far as to claim that before he had had his heart-warming experience he could scarcely have been considered a Christian. This dramatic and life-altering experience led to the development of another important root of Methodism that, as all roots do, anchors, sustains, and nourishes the practice of our faith today.

As Wesley continued to explore God’s grace in his life and how he was to live that out, he let his Aldersgate experience move him to step up his preaching. He became enthusiastic in urging people to a life of faith, and, like him, towards an experience of true assurance and salvation. It was during this time that he preached his second sermon at St. Mary’s Church in Oxford, indicting his hearers as false Christians in their hearts (see Root 2), and alienating the leaders of the University so much that, at the school he had attended as a student and presently served as a fellow, he was never invited to preach again.

The problem was that he was preaching to, as Rev. Adam Hamilton says in his book, Revival, a “society of polite, lukewarm Christians who in many ways had become inoculated against vital Christianity by years of religious conflict and a lifetime of proper religion that asked nothing more of them than to attend church once in awhile and try to be decent human beings.” People were skeptical of his “enthusiasm” for the evidence of the Holy Spirit in his hearers’ lives. He believed that true change in someone’s heart would be revealed in outward ways, through evidences of peace, joy, and love, and claimed that the true “Methodist” is one
who has “the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him.” (The Character of a Methodist, 1741)

He was invited to fewer and fewer pulpits, and accused more and more of being obnoxious in his spiritual fervor.

In 1739, his friend George Whitefield, who had been part of the Holy Club at Oxford and who had become a well-known evangelistic preacher while Wesley had been in Georgia, invited Wesley to join him in Bristol. Whitefield had begun preaching in fields and town squares, as a result of his also being barred from preaching in church buildings, and to considerable effect in Bristol. As a commercial center that was becoming a key trade port for North American and the West Indies, Bristol was full of merchants, and surrounded by coal mines.

At first, Wesley was shocked that Whitefield was preaching in the open air. In his journal he wrote that he, “should have through the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.” However, reflecting that Jesus himself often preached outdoors, Wesley quickly realized that this was an authentic way to witness to the good news of Christ, particularly to people who didn’t or couldn’t go to church.

Wesley’s first experience of field-preaching was to 3,000 people, and over the course of a month, he estimates that he preached to 47,500 people! Coal miners made up the majority of his listeners. Their lives were difficult: they worked hard, died young, their children were poor and uneducated. An observer described how tears traced paths in the coal dust on their faces as they listened to the messages of God’s love and grace for them.

Wesley was concerned that there needed to be a way to invite those who heard him preach into a more formalized connection to Christian community, even if it wasn’t through the existing church structure. He began to invite people to join societies, groups of people who wanted to practice their faith together, similar to the societies he had created at Oxford and in Georgia, in order to provide more opportunities for them to have an ongoing relationship with God.

The efforts of Wesley and Whitefield brought so many people into community that they needed a place to hold everyone and provide adequate space for meetings and prayer groups. Accordingly, the two largest societies in Bristol combined their assets to purchase some land, and Wesley helped fund the construction of a house that came to be known as the New Room. This was the first meeting house with connections specifically to the Methodist movement, where Wesley himself would preach, encourage, and help raise up other preachers, and where there was space for visiting clergy, a meeting room, and a small area for Wesley’s use when he was in town.

Roots: Discovering the Story of John Wesley and Methodism

Week 4

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Most importantly, in Bristol, Wesley saw the need to break down the obstacles that the traditional religion structure erected that prevented certain people, mostly the poor, laborers, and their families, from receiving the physical and spiritual care they needed. The Gospel of Matthew (9:35-38) describes how Jesus did just this during his life. “Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’”

Jesus loved people where they were, and called his followers to model their lives after him by reaching out to the “harassed and helpless” with compassion. The imagery of an abundant field, as far as the eye can see, ripe and ready to be harvested, and the need for workers who will go into the field, is a powerful one as we think of Wesley preaching in the midst of a field to crowds of people who were ready and in desperate need of the gospel. Wesley realized he was one of those called to be a laborer, as were all faithful Christians.

And more than just providing a nourishing word for their souls, Wesley realized that there was an opportunity to nourish their minds and bodies. One of the things that had always been a part of the Methodist movement from its early beginnings in Oxford found even more room to breathe in Bristol. Wesley deeply believed education was the key to escaping poverty of person and of spirit. Witnessing the deep poverty around them in Bristol, Wesley and Whitefield combined their influence to build a school open to people of all ages where they could not only learn reading, writing and arithmetic, but also learn to “know God and Jesus Christ.”

“Wesley’s parish was not only without boundaries and his congregation without pedigree, but his concept of ministry was without limits.” (Heitzenrater)

The only parameters Wesley set on his ministry, and on any who followed Christ alongside him, came from Jesus himself. Throughout his entire life, in his teaching and preaching, Wesley came back to the words of Christ found in Matthew 22.

A lawyer asked Jesus a question in order to test him: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” It was a trick question as the Jews didn’t place one law about any of the others. However, Jesus answers, “ ‘You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus not only answers the original question, but goes a step further. He connects the two commandments in a way that one
cannot occur separate from the other. If you love God, then you must also, necessarily, love your neighbor.

These adjoining commandments of Christ arguably became the foundation of Wesley’s understanding of what faith really was, and could be seen as the motto of the Methodist movement: Love of God, and love of neighbor. In other words, it isn’t enough to simply have a deep, even personal connection and relationship with God through Christ. One must also express God’s love and grace through service and intentional love towards those around you. That Wesley believed this included caring and serving people the way Jesus did, spiritually as well as physically, is clear. He references this scripture yet again, and says in one of his last sermons, On the Wedding Garment, “In a word, holiness [being in right relationship with God] is the having ‘the mind that was in Christ’, and the ‘walking as Christ walked’.” Wesley understood having the mind of Christ to refer to a personal holiness; for Wesley, walking as Christ walked was about practicing a social holiness.

Wesley would continue to practice social holiness, to reach out to those in need, as he moved the center of his ministry to London. His ministry would include establishing a clinic that provided medical care for the poor, creating homes for widows and orphans, and building more schools for poor children to receive a full education.

True faith, for Wesley, was not something that existed in one sphere: personal or social, rather in both. According to Wesley, people needed to have faith, and because of their faith, do works of love and charity for those around them. Wesley could not love God without loving his neighbor, and that became a deep root of the United Methodist Church that continues to anchor and nourish us today.

Hymn 385: Let Us Plead for Faith Alone, Charles Wesley, 1740

Let us plead for faith alone, faith which by our works is shown; God it is who justifies, only faith the grace applies.
Active faith that lives within, conquers hell and death and sin, hallows whom it first made whole, forms the Savior in the soul.
Let us for this faith contend, sure salvation is the end; heaven already is begun, everlasting life is won.
Only let us persevere till we see our Lord appear, never from the Rock remove, saved by faith which works in love.
Reflection Questions

- Why do you think Wesley was viewed as obnoxious in his fervor to those who were “comfortable in church,” yet his preaching brought tears of hope to those who worked in the coalmines?
- Can you think of a modern day example of this?
- The Gospel is often referred to as the “Good News,” what is the “bad news” to which the “Good News” brings hope?
- What does “Good News” mean to you today?
- Wesley believed in both personal and social holiness, how have you experienced both in your life?
- Based on Matthew 22, is there a difference between loving God and loving neighbor? When we love one are we automatically loving the other?
- How can social holiness become a greater part of your faith?
- How will you share with others the grace God has shown you?
- Now that you are more deeply rooted, how do you hope to grow this week?
Root Five: Rich, robust discipleship.

Opening Questions:

- What does it mean to be a disciple?
- In what ways are you a disciple of Jesus Christ?
- Why is discipleship important to the church?

One of the things about roots is that they continue to grow. What starts off as a single primary root develops secondary roots and root hairs, and becomes more and more complex as more roots grow. The growth of the roots serve to anchor the plant in the ground even further, and provide more surface area with which to absorb nutrients and minerals from the ground. The growth of the roots support more growth of the plant.

Wesley’s ministry continued to grow and broaden to reach more and more people, in Bristol, in London, and throughout England. During this time, his theology, or understanding of God, was also growing and developing, and he began seeing how God’s grace not only forgives us from sin, but is also evident in a distinct way as we grow daily in grace.

As he continued to study scripture, the tradition of the church, and reflect on his own personal experience of God’s grace, he realized that, rather than a momentary experience of grace resulting in salvation once and for all, as he previously believed (see Roots 3), experiences of grace were ongoing and could be understood in three distinct ways.

1. First, he saw God’s grace, God’s love at work in our lives, as prevenient, existing always for us even before we can do anything to understand it or desire it.
2. He distinguished the next experience of grace as justifying grace, what God does for us, specifically the forgiveness of sin, when we are reconciled to God.
3. Finally, he explains sanctifying grace as what God does in us, actually transforming us into holy and righteous beings, and working to continuously move us closer to God’s will.

Wesley began to realize that it wasn’t enough to just seek forgiveness of sin, but, by God’s grace, we could also desire to become like Christ. Because the Holy Spirit actually works in us, we can become holy and righteous, growing in grace and living it out daily.

Now, let’s look at the three functions of roots one more time. Roots anchor a plant in place, providing a stable foundation from which the plant can grow. Roots give life by storing energy and the DNA of a plant, always ensuring the potential for new life, even if the top of the plant
seems dead. Roots continuously nourish a plant, giving to the plant the vital water, nutrients and minerals the plant needs to flourish.

This can help us understand how Wesley saw God’s grace at work in our lives. Prevenient grace anchors us in God’s love, and provides the foundation for our growth in God. Justifying grace gives us new life in Christ, even if we are overwhelmed by our mistakes and failures. Finally, sanctifying grace is continuous nourishment, helping us to grow in the Spirit and in relationship with God and to become transformed by God’s love.

As Wesley continued to preach outdoors to thousands of people, one of the things he recognized was that there needed to be some follow up. If he could preach and possibly convict many of his hearers of God’s desire for their lives, there needed to be a way of helping them to live into that desire by nurturing and regularly developing their faith. If preaching could lead to an experience of justifying grace, there had to be a way to encourage people in their experience of sanctifying grace.

Wesley saw his own relationship with God as something to develop and continually work at. It was something that required constant tending and encouragement from a faithful community. And he thought other people’s relationship with God needed the same.

Wesley invited the people who heard him preach to join a society, a sometimes large group of people who would gather weekly to sing hymns, pray together, hear preaching, and encourage one another in the faith. Some of those people would form into bands, smaller more intensive groups that would seek deeper spiritual development. Wesley then helped the societies form into classes, based on geographic neighborhoods. People would grow in faith with their literal neighbors, as well as with broader, diverse groups of faithful people.

This resulted in the growth of a secondary root of United Methodism. The different groups within societies provided ways for lay people, who had no formal training and were not ordained, to be leaders in the movement. This was especially the case because so many of the clergy in the Church of England were rejecting what they viewed as Wesley’s radicalism, and refusing to credit or acknowledge any of his ministry by offering pastoral support and leadership. The growth and development of the Methodist movement depended on lay people. As normal, everyday people grew in their discipleship, lay people being able to lead and witness to their faith in public ways became a unique attribute of the Methodists.

This is certainly true of the United Methodist church still today, where we believe every member has a ministry, and all are encouraged to be active in the life of the church and take leadership roles as part of their growth in grace and love of Christ.
In November of 1739, Wesley preached to 7 or 8 thousand at the site of a former foundry for cannons in London. It became the place used by the society there, to organize and grow the hub of what would be Methodist expressions of faith—prayer meetings, works of charity, organized spiritual development.

As Methodism grew, many small Methodist chapels were built throughout England. In London, eventually, the Foundry could no longer support the needs of the society, and the “Cathedral of Methodism,” or City Road Chapel, as was built in 1778. Now called Wesley’s Chapel, Wesley preached there many times, built a home next door, and is buried there.

For the remainder of his life, Wesley continued to preach a holiness of heart and life, and encouraged the Methodists to engage them both for a full, rich understanding and experience of discipleship. Wesley took seriously his role in proclaiming the good news and challenging the people called Methodists to grow in love of God and neighbor.

- He preached against slavery and challenged the Methodists who made their living off the slave trade.
- He grew concerned that a movement that had started with some of the poorest, humblest, youngest, least-established people, had now grown to great influence and resources. He encouraged all Methodists to value their resources by earning all they could, saving all they could, and giving all they could, never letting their money or resources supplant God in their hearts.
- He preached several times combating bigotry, exclusivism, and division within the church, urging that God cares about a person’s heart, even more than what a person thinks and believes.

Most importantly, he continued to emphasize spiritual disciplines of scripture study, prayer, serving with the poor, worship, and participation in the sacraments. Not one thing was the key, but by all these means of grace, faith in God would continue to grow and a person would experience the grace upon grace of Jesus Christ every day of life. Today, we see this root of Methodism, a full and robust discipleship supported by these same means of grace, as ways for us to respond to and participate in God’s all encompassing and deeply rooted grace in our lives.

If a plant is to survive and thrive, the connection to its roots needs to be strong. Without that connection, a plant becomes stunted, unhealthy, and eventually withers and dies. A plant with a strong root system will continue to grow, flourish and eventually produce seeds so that the plant itself not only continues to thrive, but helps to spread life.
Throughout Wesley’s life, his experiences and understanding of God, and God’s call on his life, rooted him in a deep and ever deepening relationship with God. This in turn was the root of a movement, a revival, a renewal in the church, which grew and blossomed into the United Methodist church as we know it today. By staying connected to our roots, our faith will continue to grow and strengthen and we will find ways to share the life we have in Christ with a world that needs life and life abundant.

Finally, as the author of the letter to the church in Ephesus prays for the community there, so might have Wesley prayed for the Methodists in his time, and so he might pray for the United Methodist church today:

“I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.” (Eph. 4:14-21)

_Hymn 332: Spirit of Faith, Come Down, Charles Wesley, 1746_

_Spirit of faith, come down, reveal the things of God, and make to us the Godhead known, and witness with the blood. 'Tis thine the blood to apply and give us eyes to see, who did for every sinner die hath surely died for me._

_No one can truly say that Jesus is the Lord, unless thou take the veil away and breathe the living Word. Then, only then, we feel our interest in his blood, and cry with joy unspeakable, "Thou art my Lord, my God!"

_O that the world might know the all atoning Lamb! Spirit of faith, descend and show the virtue of his name; the grace which all may find, the saving power, impart, and testify to humankind, and speak in every heart._

_Inspire the living faith, (which whoso'er receive, the witness in themselves they have and consciously believe), the faith that conquers all, and doth the mountain move, and saves whoe'er on Jesus call, and perfects them in love._
Reflection Questions:

- Wesley differed from other "gospel preachers" of his time by placing an emphasis on discipleship as well as conversion, how does your church view discipleship?
- What role did discipleship play in the maturation of John Wesley's faith?
- What role has discipleship played in the maturation of your faith?
- Can you give examples of times you have experienced the various "means of grace" of which Wesley spoke?
- What role does community play in discipleship?
- Discipleship is not the end goal, rather a means to an end. Based on this study what would you say is the end goal?
- Having completed this study, do you feel you are more rooted in your Methodist heritage? In your faith in general?
- Now that your roots are set how do you expect to thrive and help to spread life... like all healthy, deeply rooted plants do?