

**The Wesley Challenge:
LOVING OURSELVES**

**Genesis 1:26-31
Matthew 22:34-40**

*Loving God means loving
the child God created.*

A sermon preached by
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We are living in challenging times. Like in the book and movie *The Perfect Storm*, it seems like one tragedy has piled on top of another until it has created a catastrophic disruption of life as we know it.¹ Worldwide pandemic, widespread unemployment, systemic racism, police violence, governmental confusion, and denominational uncertainty—it's been a wild ride lately.

But you know, sometimes the challenging times of life bring out the best in people. We have seen it across the country: the heroism of our police, first responders, and medical personnel, mostly peaceful protests, churches and businesses being creative to serve their constituencies, neighbors reaching out to neighbors to stay connected and to provide for needs.

One of the critical challenges early in the coronavirus crisis was the need for ventilators. Acute shortages were predicted if the curve went high. Ventec Life Systems, a manufacturer of ventilators, did not have the capacity to mass-produce the machines. So they went to General Motors, the car and truck manufacturer, to ask for help. They told the GM executives that one of the biggest challenges to making ventilators was a critical part that was made in a factory in India, which was under lockdown from the virus.

But General Motors has some resources. They flew people to India that day to get boots on the ground to get the factory operational so they could get ventilators in production. They worked with the Indian government, and Ventec worked with GM, and when they heard what was happening, Ford Motor Company and General Electric also came alongside in an effort they started calling Project V. With the cooperation of all the parties, they expect to make 12,000 ventilators by the end of June and 50,000 by the end of July.²

The way things are looking, we may need them all.

Sometimes, even often, people respond to challenges by giving their best. The challenges we face today are also spiritual in nature. But people of faith do not withdraw from a challenge. People of faith meet the challenge with courage and perseverance and hope. People of faith respond to challenge by going deep into their spiritual resources and standing on the solid foundation. It might seem counter-intuitive, but the best way to

respond to challenges in our lives is not to run away, but to meet the challenge head-on spiritually. That's how we see what we're really made of.

That's the thinking behind our "Wesley Challenge." In the midst of this crisis, we need to remind ourselves of the deep stuff, the foundation, what we're really made of. Because we're made of good stuff!

The Wesley Challenge grew out of a study of the earliest Methodists, even before they were called Methodists. (I'm glad someone finally nicknamed them Methodists; I'd hate to be known today as Bible Moths or Holy Clubbers.) John and Charles Wesley and a couple of other Oxford University students began meeting together to encourage one another in their faith. Part of their spiritual exercises was 21 Questions that they asked one another each week when they gathered for their small group meeting.

We were planning on spending three weeks in June building up steam for Vacation Bible School Sunday on June 21. When VBS became at-home and online, it gave us the perfect opportunity to dive into this study of the questions that gave birth to the Methodist movement. In these challenging times, it was time for a spiritual challenge.

The grounding Scripture for the Wesley Challenge is what we call the Great Commandment. In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, this foundational principle comes during the last week of Jesus' life, as he is teaching in the Temple. The religious leaders are trying to trip him up so they can make a case against him. One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to tell them the greatest commandment of all. There were 613 of them; how could he pick just one?

But Jesus reached back into his upbringing and drew out the foundation of the Jewish faith. In Mark, he includes the *shema*—this is Judaism 101: "*The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'*"³ This would not have been unexpected. But then Jesus adds another verse from deep in the Jewish tradition, this one the key verse in the Holiness Code, the core of the Book of Leviticus: "*And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*"⁴

In this masterstroke, Jesus forever binds together the love of God and the love of neighbor. This is the foundation of our faith. If you only ever memorize two passages of Scripture, memorize John 3:16, then the Great Commandment. That's about all you need to know.

So as Roy Beth shared with you last week, this Scripture and the Wesley Challenge lead us to look upward, inward, and outward. Last week we looked upward, to the love of God; this week we are looking inward. We are to love our neighbor *as ourselves*. What does that mean? I thought Jesus said to deny yourself. Oprah says love yourself. What is Jesus talking about here? Loving your neighbor as yourself means that it is a given that you love yourself. Almost everyone loves himself or herself. Maybe you don't love everything about yourself, but generally we have an innate sense of self that is positive. That's good, and that's healthy. What does it mean to love yourself in a healthy, positive, and faithful way?

Loving yourself means knowing yourself. You are pretty incredible. In fact, from the very beginning of creation, we affirm that human beings are made in the image of God: "*So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*"⁵ The Psalmist refers to the divine creation of humanity this way: "*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works.*"⁶ Did you ever think of yourself as wonderful? When the New Testament talks about human nature, often it is in terms of family: "*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. ...Beloved, we are God's children now.*"⁷ When we know ourselves, we know that we are children of God, created wonderfully in God's image.

We also love ourselves by taking care of ourselves. This life, this body, this person, is a creation of God, and we are called to care for God's creation. We love ourselves by caring for our bodies, our minds, and our spirit. I could do a whole series just on this aspect, and you can read many books about caring for yourself in any way imaginable.

John Wesley also believed in taking care of yourself. He wrote a book of common remedies for the physical ailments of his day. It was a best

seller in the England of his time. Some of his 21 questions are just down-to-earth and practical: “Do I go to bed on time and get up on time? Am I a slave to dress, friends, work, or habits? How do I spend my spare time?” If you love yourself, you’re going to take care of what God put together for you.

Taking care also means getting help when you need it, and sometimes you will need it. If you’re sick, seek out medical help. You’d be surprised how hard that is for some people. If you are distressed emotionally or mentally, find some counselling or psychotherapy. God made those helpers for a reason, just like God made you in God’s image.

The third way to love yourself is to improve yourself. God loves you just like you are, but God loves you so much God will not leave you like you are. There are always ways to improve ourselves—to know more, to gain new skills, to be “smarter, better, faster, and stronger,” if I can quote Kanye West in a sermon. Sometimes small improvements can make a big difference.

For years, British bicycle racers were the laughingstock of the cycling world. They had won only one Olympic medal in a century. The Tour de France? Forget it! British bicycle companies refused to sell their bikes to the team for fear their sales would go down if people saw the team using their equipment. Seriously.

Then in 2003, the team hired Dave Brailsford as their coach. His philosophy was called “marginal gains;” it was a relentless commitment to making a tiny margin of improvement in every aspect of a process. He said, “You break down everything that goes into riding a bike. Then you improve it by one percent, and you will get a significant increase when you put them all together.”

Brailsford and his team made small adjustments in hundreds of different areas. They redesigned the bike seats for more comfort. They rubbed alcohol on the tires for a better grip. They redesigned the racing suits they wore.

As these one percent improvements accumulated, the results came faster than anyone could have imagined. The British Cycling team won two gold medals in the 2004 Olympics. In 2008, they dominated the Beijing

Olympics. In 2012, in the London Olympics, they set nine Olympic records and seven world records. From 2012 to 2018, the Brits won the Tour de France six times in seven years.⁸ Marginal gains produced great success.

John Wesley had a term for marginal gains. He called it sanctification. We don't have to become perfect immediately when we start following Jesus, but if we love ourselves the way Jesus does, we will commit ourselves to growing little by little, improving our discipleship performance, until we become a world-class Christian.

To love yourself, know yourself as a child of God; take care of yourself; and improve yourself. **Finally, love yourself by giving yourself.** A true love of self commits the self to something bigger than the self. It's what Jesus was talking about when he said, "Deny yourself; take up your cross and follow me."⁹ This is the greatest love of all—to give yourself to something beyond yourself to fulfill what you were created to be. Jesus said that, too.¹⁰ Jesus did that.

Giving yourself is what keeps loving yourself from being merely self-absorption. Self-centeredness is the original sin, but true love of self is centered on God and reaches out to others. If you are reading *The Wesley Challenge* book, you will read at the end of the second week how Chris Folmsbee recommends we steer our self-love away from self-absorption. He says to:

- Volunteer and serve others. Doing something focused on someone else can help you find the real you.
- Engage in random acts of kindness. Make someone else's day, maybe even anonymously.
- Practice empathy. Just listening to someone else's story takes the focus off your own problems and difficulties.
- Get out of your comfort zone. Try something new or do something you don't expect to like. You may surprise yourself.
- Let someone else lead for once. Most of us like to be in control. Let someone else call the shots, drive the car, make the decision. Your true self might appreciate the relief.
- Begin to know someone you find hard to like. Some people just rub us the wrong way, don't they? If we can follow Jesus' command to love,

and truly develop an interest in that person we don't like, it will be a victory for love in every direction—upward, inward, and outward.¹¹

In the end, we can love ourselves because we are worthy of love. God made us this way, and “God don't make no junk!”¹² Author Marianne Williamson expresses this idea in almost a poetic way when she writes,

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?” Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.¹³

We are living in challenging times. But I believe we are also living in exciting and energizing times. We are facing many obstacles, but what better time to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Universe? What better time to be part of the family of God? I believe right now, through the challenges we are facing, God is giving us an opportunity to create an exciting new chapter for our lives and for the church. In the next few months, we will re-launch First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith. But it doesn't have to be a return to the way we used to be. In fact, it can't be. In the re-launch of our church, we will have both the challenge and the opportunity to re-invent, re-imagine, renew, and restore the church.

As we step into this new chapter, we had better be sure of our foundation: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” We have turned our eyes upward and inward. Next week, we will turn our eyes outward to see a mission field that is ready for harvest. It's going to be a great ride!

¹ Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm* (New York, Norton, 1997).

² Geoff Baker, "Inside the 'incredibly challenging' effort by GM and Ventec to make more ventilators for coronavirus fight," *The Seattle Times* (3-20-20).

³ Mark 12:29-30.

⁴ Matthew 22:39-40.

⁵ Genesis 1:27.

⁶ Psalm 139:13-14.

⁷ I John 3:1-2.

⁸ James Clear, *Atomic Habits*, (Avery, 2018), 13ff.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dave_Brailsford.

⁹ Matthew 16:24 and parallels.

¹⁰ John 15:13.

¹¹ Chris Folmsbee, *The Wesley Challenge: 21 Days To A More Authentic Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2017), 87f.

¹² Attributed to Ethel Waters, African-American vocalist.

<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/322619-i-am-somebody-cause-god-don-t-make-no-junk>.

¹³ Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles,"* https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/17297.Marianne_Williamson.