

This is not technically an official Church holiday, but maybe for us it should be. Today people from all over our part of Ohio will head to Lakeside to do what John Wesley once called “holy conferencing.” For about 15 years now I have used this Sunday to focus on something very important about what John Wesley left to us as people called Methodists. But first we need to spend some time with our lesson from John 15.

Jesus uses a biblical metaphor here that might have been known to the people of his day ( they didn't have Bibles available like we do ). The prophet Isaiah had a beautiful poem about the Vineyard in his writings, chapter 5. The people of Israel and Judah are referred to as God's vineyard. There was a warning in this poem that God would let the original vineyard be over-run and over-grown. This came to pass. Perhaps knowing that sad history, Jesus makes a bold new statement on the old idea of the vineyard being the people. Now he says “I AM THE TRUE VINE, AND YOU ARE THE BRANCHES.” Jesus now is the living Vine, and the people who are with him are the living branches. So he says *Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

This all makes good sense. It is how it works. Jill and I saw this in Canada on our walks last week. Right next to the cottage we were in, a small tornado came across the lake last year and

went through the woods, and really ripped things up. The cottage was spared, but so many trees were destroyed. The branches are broken off, laying there withering away. They are not connected, so they cannot live. It's just like Jesus said: apart from me ( and each other ) you can do nothing. This passage is actually our focus and theme for Annual Conference this year. Now, I don't know if John Wesley talked about this passage a great deal or not, but he really emphasized the principle of the thing. Wesley said that basically we must abide in the Vine, and we must abide with each other. This leads to some Wesley Methodist information that we cannot do without!

In case anyone ever asks you **“Hey, how did the Methodist Church actually get started?”** you could respond by saying **“Thanks for asking such a fine question, and here is a solid answer for you!”** It all went like this...

Once upon a time, England was a mess. In 1678, 100 years before the American Revolution, England was a mess. People had moved into the cities which led to lots of troubles, there were rum bars on every corner in London, along with young girl prostitutes on every corner as well. London was a mess, and especially a moral mess. So, in 1678 the Church of England tried to stop the moral decline by starting within the Church what they called **“religious societies.”** These were basically designed to be groups of people in which the people would become better people, and then have an influence on the lives of other people. The idea was to accomplish certain things in

people: 1) speak no evil of others, 2) have fewer temper outbursts, 3) make time to reflect on your own faith and life, and 4 ) do some good for others, especially those in need. People were supposed to meet together and become a spiritual support group of sorts. And through these religious societies England would become a better place. Well, how did that go?

John Wesley's father Samuel was an Anglican Priest, and he did these groups in his church. When John and brother Charles Wesley went together to Oxford to be trained for the same Anglican priesthood, they decided to have one of these groups at school. It ended up being known as "The Holy Club," and in many ways it was the beginning of the Methodist movement. Again, if you had not heard this, Wesley and the guys in the Club were called "Methodists" as an insult, because they were organized and orderly in how they met together. The name "methodist" was an insult. But John Wesley decided to keep the name.

Continuing with our story, once John Wesley and his friend George Whitefield went out to preach to people coming out of the coal mines, the ones who wanted a better life stepped forward and John Wesley told them "There is a meeting at such and such a place on Tuesday nights. Go there, and tell them I sent you." People would go to a weekly gathering near where they lived, and after some singing the people would get into smaller groups. This was essential for John Wesley, who insisted that people need "more intimate Christian conversation."

We have to emphasize something right here: **WESLEY DID NOT INTEND TO START A NEW CHURCH!** There were already lots of new churches and denominations. Wesley was Anglican, Church of England. Wesley was just trying to help produce better Christians who would then go be a part of already existing churches and bring new life within them. Again, what was our original question here? **“Hey, how did the Methodist Church actually get started?”** Well, it was not intended to be a church at all, but a renewal group that would help grow better Christians for the sake of the whole Church. Here is the really important part...

Wesley believed that people needed to “abide in the Vine.” They needed to be involved **EVERY WEEK** with what he called a **CLASS MEETING**. At this meeting people would sing together and then go into smaller groups and think about these questions: Do you feel forgiven? Do you feel at peace with God? How are you connected to other people around you? Once John Wesley got it going, many small groups of growing connected Christians would address these 5 questions in their meetings together: 1) what sins have you done? 2) do you have temptations? 3) have you been delivered from these temptations? 4) have you done something but are not sure whether or not it is a sin? And finally 5) do you have something that you must keep secret?

Can we imagine people getting together today and daring to ask questions like these of each other? But let's think about it. Once a group of less than 10 people would get to know each

other, and trust each other, and start to talk about something more important than sports or the weather, what kinds of good growth might take place? How might people change and grow? We must know that this was the heart of Wesley's plan to help develop people with deeper Christian hearts and lives. And these people were intended to go into other churches and help them be better churches. But it came to pass that these Methodists were not welcome in the Church of England, so they had no choice but to start their own. And they did.

A few weeks ago our Bishop addressed all the pastors and asked us the great Wesleyan question: How is it going with your soul? That is the big question. She asked us an even more important question: Do we have anyone in our lives who can ask each of us that question? I realized that at this point of my life, I don't have anyone asking me that question. But I need it, just like we all need it. I will be working to change that this Summer. And I need you to hold me to that. But then I need to turn it around for your well being: Is there anyone, in a small group setting asking you about the well being of your soul? Long ago Jesus told people that they needed to abide in the Vine, with him and with one another. And John Wesley discovered about 250 years ago that we need to be abiding with one another, on a regular basis, with a group of friends who are on the same spiritual journey, asking that question, "How goes it with your soul?"

BTW: John Wesley and his groups are actually given much credit for keeping England from blowing up. Other countries

ended up with big violent revolutions and trouble. Wesley's movement in England raised the quality of life for those people. Husbands became better husbands and fathers, families became stronger and healthier. It really happened. Does that sound like something that our land could use in these times? More importantly we have to ask, if we are to be true Wesleyan Methodists, how can we live without doing these things? We don't have to ask the questions they asked from long ago. But we too need to abide, not just in some private personal faith life, but we need to abide with one another. May God grant us wisdom and goodness as we seek to carry this out. AMEN.