

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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May 8, 2016

Series: John Wesley

Sermon: A Mother's Love ~ Susanna Wesley

I Thessalonians 2:1-8 (NIV)

You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. 2 We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. 3 For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. 4 On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. 5 You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. 6 We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. 7 Instead, we were like young children among you.

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 8 so we cared for you.

Sermon

There was a cartoon in the Saturday Evening Post that showed a little boy talking to a friend on the phone. The boy was saying, "Mom's went to visit grandma for a few days, and she left all 4 of my brothers and my sisters, my dad, and our four pets are home all alone." The house seems strangely quiet without mom around. For those of us who had wonderful mothers, this day is a chance to say thank you. For those of us who did not have good mothers, this day is a painful reminder of all that our mother wasn't. In any case, Mother's Day is a celebration of the ideals of what a mother should and ought to be. This morning, we are continuing our sermon series on the Wesley's, the founders of the Methodist Church two hundred, almost three hundred years ago. Not that we revere and pray to the Wesley's because of their faith, but we are in the company of the Wesley's as they try and make their faith real and practical in their lives. Mother's Day was actually born out of the Methodist Church years ago. And today, we look at their mother, Susanna. While it is noted in history that the Methodist Movement in England was born out of the work of John Wesley, it must be noted that it was indeed a family affair. His brother Charles was his number one companion and sidekick during the revival. He wrote countless hymns, many of which are in our hymnal and are known by the world. John's father, Samuel, was an Anglican Priest who instilled in his family the duties of piety and discipleship. But it was his mother, Susanna, that was to have the lasting impression on John. Indeed, it can be said that without Susanna, the Methodists never would have been. As the mother of the Wesley's, she is the mother of the Methodists, and it was her leadership and devotion that made her sons John and Charles do the things that they did.

When Susanna Annesley, the 25th child of Dr. Annesley, was born to his second wife there probably was not much discussion about her or her future. Little could the family dream that she would become the most famous of the family. Susanna was an "old lady of 19" (almost a late marriage in those days) when she became the wife of Samuel Wesley, an Anglican minister. They moved to Epworth, a small village in the back waters of rural Britain.

Like many relationships, it was a tough but blessed marriage. The Wesley family traced their lineage to the 10th century, but ancestry did little to help the problems of their forty-four year marriage. They suffered illness, disease, poverty, and the death of children. Fire twice destroyed their home. But through it all Susanna accepted the will of God and placed herself and her family in His hands. One of their fights was over politics. In the 1700's it was a very divisive climate in England over who had legitimate control over the throne. Samuel and

Susanna were both Tories, but while Samuel accepted William of Orange as King William III, Susanna considered James II to be the true king. It threatened to break up the family. Once in 1701 Susanna refused to say "Amen" to Samuel's prayer for King William. Tension ensued. Samuel left for London for a year-long assignment. They didn't mind their separation. He returned in 1702 when Queen Anne, whom they both acknowledged as the legitimate sovereign, came to the throne. The family came back together. About nine-ten months later, John was born. So in a real sense, we might say that John was the child of their reconciliation.

Susanna bore between seventeen and nineteen children; ten survived. The frequent absences of her husband on church business left the management of the household in her hands. Through it all she remained a steadfast Christian who taught not only through the Scriptures, but through her own example of daily trust in God. She once wrote: We must know God experientially for unless the heart perceive and know Him to be to be the supreme good, her only happiness, unless the soul feel and acknowledge that she can have no repose, no peace, no joy, but in loving and being loved by Him.

The children were raised strictly. They were taught to cry softly, to eat what was put before them, and not to raise their voices or play noisily. Physical punishment was used, but confession of faults could avoid it. All but one of the children learned to read from the age of five, including the girls - a rarity in those days. (Susanna made it a rule for herself to spend an hour a day with each of the children over the period of a week.) Last week, I preached about the fire and John's dramatic rescue at age five. After the fire of 1709 family discipline broke down somewhat, but Susanna managed to restore it later. She paid special attention to John, who was almost lost in the fire. He referred to himself as "a brand plucked from the burning fire," and his mother said that she intended to be more particularly careful of the soul of this child that Thou hast so mercifully provided for, than ever I have been, that I may do my endeavors to instill into his mind the disciplines of Thy true religion and virtue.

It is said that at the age of six or seven John thought he would never marry "because I could never find such a woman as my father had."

While her husband was again absent in London in 1711, Mrs. Wesley adopted the practice of worshiping with her family, and instructing them. One of their servants told his parents and they wished to come. These told others, and they came, till the congregations amounted to forty, and increased till they were over two hundred, and the parsonage could not contain all that came. She read to them the best and most awakening sermons she could find in the library, talked to the people freely and affectionately. There meetings were held "because she thought the end of the institution of the Sabbath was not fully answered by attending Church unless the intermediate spaces of time were filled up by other acts of devotion."

While Samuel was gone, a Curate pastor was taking care of the church. He would get a small crowd on Sunday mornings that included the Wesley mother and children, but later in the evenings, Susanna would have dozens more at her home while they had evening worship. The substitute preacher became jealous because her audience was larger than his, and he wrote to Mr. Wesley, complaining that his wife, in his absence, had turned the parsonage into the real church; that the Church was likely to be scandalized by such irregular proceedings; and that they ought to be tolerated no longer. Mr. Wesley wrote to his wife that she should get someone else to read the sermons. She replied that there was not a man there who could read a sermon without spoiling it.

Mr. Inman, the Curate, still complained, and wrote to Mrs. Wesley that the meetings should be discontinued. Mrs. Wesley answered him by showing what good the meetings had done, and that none were opposed to them but Mr. Inman and one other. She then concludes with these wonderful sentences: "If after all this you think fit to dissolve this assembly do not tell me you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send your *positive command* in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity for doing good when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of

our Lord Jesus Christ.

Were not these the first Methodist meetings held by the Wesleys? What made Methodism grow in the beginnings were the small groups that formed. It wasn't so much doctrine or worship or theology, in as much as a group of people coming together to make their faith practical. How does one do faith? How does one live out their spirituality. That is what Susanna taught her children. The father taught about religion. Susanna made it practical. Lived-out. Real. It's one thing to learn about love. It's quite another doing it.

After Samuel Wesley died in 1735, Susanna lived with her children, especially, in her last year, with John. She died on July 23, 1742 and was buried in London's Bunhill Fields, where John Bunyan and Isaac Watts are also buried. Her sons won tens of thousands of souls to Christ. She would not have wished for more.

Susanna taught her children the meaning of love. Of discipline. Of charity. Of honor. But it wasn't just lip service. It was real. It was lived out through their interactions with each other, through time and their shared lives. In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, he reminds them of his time with them. Paul is reflecting on his time spent in Thesolonica preaching the Gospel. The letter of I Thesolians is probably the earliest written of all the New Testament books. And in the text, Paul shares that he and his companions were like a mother to them, caring and loving them. Not being a burden, but sharing in the trials and the tribulations. They didn't just show up, tell them about Christ and move on, but they lived with them, among them. And throughout it all, they were holy and righteous and blameless among them. And Paul and Company were able to start a wonderful church in that town because of who they said they were, the lives that they led and their hopes for the future. Their success came because they lived out what they taught. And I believe that is the best gift that a mother can bestow upon her family. To live the life of holiness, of righteousness, to be blameless. To offer up their lives as a living example of the love in which they teach. How many times have you heard your mom say, "I hope you have children who act just like you." I'll tell you. I hope that's true! Look at your lives now. If you don't want your children to grow up to become what you are now, then maybe you'd better look at yourself in the mirror and see what you need to change about yourself. Be a living example of love. A mother's love is never wasted. Live the life worthy of the name mother, so that your children do grow up to be just like you.

It was a Rally Day program at the church and a little girl was to recite the Scripture that she had memorized for the occasion. When she got in front of the crowd, however, the sight of hundreds of eyes peering at her caused her to forget her line. In the front row, her mother caught the look of desperation in her child's eyes and started to try and give hints to her daughter. She gestured, moved her lips, everything, anything, that would help her out. Finally, in desperation, she whispered ever so softly the opening phrase of the scripture., "I am the light of the world." Immediately the child's face lit up and a smile appeared on it as she said with supreme confidence, "My mother is the light of the world!" Everyone smiled, some laughed out loud. And in reflection, noted in some ways that she wasn't far from wrong. For the mother is the light of a child's world. And thanks be to God, for that wonderful and noble responsibility. May your children grow up to be just like you. Amen.

Watch a video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clcNB_EUao8