

Has Your Heart Been Strangely Warmed? By Holly C. W. Aastuen
May 23, 2010 Acts 2:1-21 Pentecost Sunday

When my friend was in college, she was a part of a group that went to nearby churches and led worship. They sang and did skits, but since she didn't sing or act, she preached. The model of preaching she used was to look at the morning paper and read something from the paper and connect that story to faith.

One Sunday morning the group was in a church in Madison Wisconsin and she opened up the paper at about 5 that morning and there on the front page was a story about a girl who was developmentally delayed who was being cared for by a group of people in Madison. They were using a technique called patterning, where people would move the child's limbs in certain ways that were thought to help her in her mental development. People would come into her home several times a week and move her arms and legs in specific ways in an effort to help enhance her brain function.

My friend saw this article and decided to use in church for the sermon.

When she preached this sermon. She emphasized how the adult volunteers in that article were a manifestation of God's grace in that young girl's life. When she looked out at the congregation at the end of her sermon she was surprised to see tears streaming down the faces of several in the congregation. She couldn't understand what had so moved them until she was told afterward—this child in the article belonged to that church and the people who were helping the girl were people from that congregation.

Call it divine intervention, call it the movement of the Holy Spirit—whatever it was that directed her to read and preach from that article, it was an experience that my friend remembers even to this day 50 years later. It was a moving, heartwarming experience.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we remember not only the time long ago when the Holy Spirit came upon the people who were gathered at the day of Pentecost, when the sound like the rush of a mighty wind filled the house and tongues of fire rested on the heads of the disciples, but we also remember other times the Holy Spirit has touched people's lives.

One such experience of the Holy Spirit occurred in the life of John Wesley, who, though he had been preaching for years, never really had experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit in his life.

On May 24, 1738, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement, wrote in his diary: "In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I

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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."

Writing about Wesley's Aldersgate experience, Rev. Kristin Sachen comments that, in her estimation, this is the day Wesley joined the human race. Up to that point he was extremely aware of his human failings and unworthiness, but he had never felt the joy of the faith. Though he knew God's forgiveness on an intellectual level, he never felt it in his bones. He was trying to earn God's love. But on May 24 his heart melted a bit, his humanity was revealed and he knew he, too, was one of God's forgiven sinners.

Soon before his Aldersgate experience, John Wesley (1703-1791) had traveled to America to serve as an Anglican pastor to British colonists in Savannah, Georgia. A couple of experiences on that journey prepared him for this incident of his heart being strangely warmed.

The first experience came to him as he traveled on a ship across the Atlantic in 1735. One night during their voyage, the weather turned particularly stormy and as the ship was buffeted about, he feared for his life.

A group of German Moravians were also traveling on that ship. They were headed to preach to the American Indians and as the storm arose, they seemed to have no fear. Throughout the storm, they sang their hymns and appeared quite calm. After the storm Wesley asked them about their serenity in the storm and they asked him if he had faith in Christ, to which he answered, 'yes,' but he wasn't sure that he meant it.

After they arrived in Georgia, Wesley met and fell in love with a woman whom he treated more as a temptation he should resist than a woman he loved. When, after a long courtship, she told him she was marrying another man unless he gave her reason not to, he said that he had come to convert the American Indians, not to get married. She married the other man and he was heartbroken and bitter. He refused to serve communion to her after she was married. The church began to rebel against his treatment of her and the strict rules he tried to impose on them. Soon after that, in January of 1738, Wesley returned to England.

It was just four months later that he found himself in the chapel in Aldersgate Street. Though the temptation may be to name this 'heart strangely warmed' experience as a conversion experience, Wesley never referred to it as that and, in fact, rarely referred to it again. Though the experience was a significant one, Wesley wasn't freed from self-doubt, wasn't able to turn over a new leaf or have a personality change from dour and disciplined to sunny and saved. Wesley was

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still Wesley, but he always had this experience, along with several other experiences along his Christian way to remind him that he, too, could receive the grace of God.

Has your heart been strangely warmed? Have you, too, felt the assurance at one time or another, that God loves you no matter what? Have you felt the warm presence of God giving you the feeling that you are not all alone in this life?

All this week, I have been asking people, has your heart been strangely warmed? Have they had an experience where they felt that profound assurance that God loves them no matter what?

I've heard some amazing stories.

Often the stories come from times of crisis. One woman spoke of a time when she had ridden in the ambulance with her husband to the hospital. He had had a heart attack and she was left in the waiting room at 1am, her mind wheeling with all the possibilities of what the next minutes and hours would bring. As her mind and body went through this extreme stress, the words of Psalm 121 came to her: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence my help comes. My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth...The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand...The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth and forevermore."

In the middle of reciting that Psalm in her head, she had this warm feeling as if God were in the room holding her. And her heart became calmer.

As she told the story later, she said that it wasn't a case of feeling that everything was going to be OK or that her husband would necessarily be healed, or that she didn't need to be afraid, but it was a feeling of "I'm here. I'm with you now. You are not alone." God had come to be with her in that difficult time.

Has your heart been strangely warmed? Have you had the assurance that God truly loves you, even you, and will be with you no matter what?

Have you been through some trying times and found that through that time you were held? These are the times that we don't talk about enough, the times that touch our soul. As I talked to people this week about their experiences of having their heart strangely warmed, more often than not there were tears as something deep inside them was touched by the memory of God with them.

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God is with us, in good times and bad, holding us and keeping us close.

I wonder if you would do something for me this week. I wonder if you would think about a time when your heart was strangely warmed, a time when you had this sense of assurance that everything was going to be all right, a time when you knew that you were not alone. Remember what that was like. Review the experience in your mind.

And then, if you are willing, tell someone about it. It could be as you drive home from church, or as you're talking to your closest friend on the phone. Tell them that your pastor preached a sermon on Sunday about having your heart strangely warmed and how she also asked you to tell someone about such an experience. Your story of such an assurance that God loves you, even you, forgives you, and is with you is a word of hope that people are longing to hear.

And if you'd like to, tell me your story. I would love to hear it. Because it's something I'm longing to hear, too.

Let us pray.

God of love, God of warm hearts, we ask that you be with us this day as we worship and this week as we go about our daily work. Help us to remember your presence with us each day. Be especially with those who are going through tough times. Bless them and us with the assurance of your love, your love that holds us through difficult times, your love that gives us strength and hope. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.