

Morning Meditation  
Thursday, July 14, 2016

“The Physics of John Wesley or  
The First Law of Spiritual Motion”

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It is indeed a pleasure and an honor to be with you this morning at Bishop Hoshibata's invitation. I have been the Episcopal Bishop of Arizona for 12 years and during that time I have enjoyed a great relationship, first with Bishop Minerva Carcaño and now with Bishop Hoshibata as we work together on such projects as Immigration Reform and Interfaith relations.

I also want to thank the Rev. Susan Brims for helping me prepare to be with you this morning. I understand from her that among the many items of business coming before you will be the election of a new bishop. Perhaps many of you are feeling a little distracted this morning as you consider your own or your friend's chances! Maybe because of your approaching election, your bishop thought this might be a good time to hear from a bishop from the mother church. I am not sure I can give you any great advice. After all, if the Bishop of London had been more on the ball in 1784, you might all still be Anglicans today!

Still, as you gather for this important election, you have chosen some great Scripture passages to reflect on, for they both have to do with moving the institutional church from focusing on itself to focusing on the world Jesus died for.

Now I am no expert on your founder John Wesley, but to me he seems to have felt this call for engagement with the world deeply in his bones. He was energized by the concept of mission. That is why I titled my sermonette this morning “The Physics of John Wesley, or the First Law of Spiritual Motion.”

Now if you have any background in science, you will be familiar with Isaac Newton's three laws of Motion. His first Law is the one I want to focus on. It is sometimes called the Principle of Inertia. It states that any object that is at rest will stay at rest unless acted upon by an outside force. As far as I know there is no evidence that John Wesley ever met Isaac Newton, although their lives overlapped.

But I think that if he had, Wesley would have easily recognized the implications Newton's theories had not just for the physical world but also for the spiritual life of the church. He would have recognized that the church will remain at rest and in complacency with its environment, unless we are acted upon by an outside force, namely the holy spirit calling us out of ourselves and into engagement with the world.

Those of us who are leaders in the church know all about inertia, don't we? We hear it in our congregations in such phrases as--We've never done it that way before, it will never work, it's too expensive, it will upset our big givers. The result is that many of our parishes are stuck in maintenance-mode thinking rather than mission-driven thinking, spending all of their time and money preserving the status quo rather than reaching out to their community with the good news of the Gospel. They are churches of inertia rather than mission. And they will stay that way until they allow themselves to be acted upon by God's spirit which is constantly pushing them out of their comfort zone into the world beyond.

John Wesley modeled this first law of spiritual motion in own life. It took him a while to realize that he was called not to remain safe at home with a comfortable cure, but to minister first to the colonists in the new world, and then more importantly, to those in England who been forgotten by the established Anglican church, those who worked in the mines and lived in the slums or labored in the field. In his autobiography he writes:

*I could scarce reconcile myself to this strange way of preaching in the fields, having been all my life till very lately so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.*

But he tried it, he liked it, and your Methodist Church is the result.

The church has always been at its best when it leaves its comfort zone to reach

the unchurched-- in the words of Star Trek, to boldly go where no man has gone before. The Methodist church especially has mission in its very blood, as witnessed not only by Wesley but by the circuit riding preachers of the early days of our country. Sadly, among mainline churches that missionary heritage has been largely forgotten as we retreat into our own religious bunkers.

James Davidson Hunter, in his book To Save the World, the Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity, talks about how in the 19<sup>th</sup> century American churches were deeply tied to the life of their communities. This was the age when denominations founded colleges, schools, hospitals and clinics. But under increased demographic secular pressure, American Christians of all stripes hunkered down in pews, and divested themselves of our community involvement. A case in point from my own history. In the early 1900's my diocese founded St Luke's hospital here in Phoenix. In 1990 it sold the hospital to a for-profit corporation for \$1.00. Why? Because, said my predecessor at the time, it was too much of a distraction from the real work of the church.

Fortunately, I think there is a shift taking place. More and more of us in leadership are realizing that the paradigm for church growth has shifted from the Build it and they will come model--so popular when I was growing up in the 60's-- to the take the Gospel to the people model, which John Wesley exemplified.

What I have termed the Physics of John Wesley were shaped by the conviction that his movement outward could only come when the church was acted upon by an outside force--and that force was God. Wesley knew that outward motion was only generated by inward piety. In Luke's Gospel we are told that as disciples we are sent out to the places that Jesus will come--we are the advance guard of the Kingdom. In Matthew's Great Commission, we are told to "Go therefore"--words spoken to a church which too often believes that Jesus last words were not "Go," but sit! Go therefore! And when we go-- Jesus will be with us always, even to the end of the age. When we focus inward, inertia will get us every time. As William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury said, "The church that lives for itself, dies by itself."

Now this little pep talk of course has its implications for you as you pick a new bishop. Quite simply, I am inviting you to be missionally minded, to make John Wesley proud, to venture into those new territories you

might have neglected--they are pretty clear for us here in Arizona--a growing hispanic population, young people, single parents, the working poor, the LGBT community, people with disabilities, all groups which those of us in the mainline churches have tended to neglect. The church is a highly political institution, don't I know, and it is always easy for us to get sucked into the trap of playing one power group off against, or settling for the candidate who might make the most people comfortable, or who will appease this or that pressure group. Don't go there, don't settle for inertia, instead listen to the prompting of the spirit and pick the most forward moving, most energized, most spiritually on fire candidate you can. Be bold, take a risk, trust God. Remember what Pope Francis said-- God is not afraid of new things!

John Wesley understood this first law of spiritual motion, otherwise how could he have said--

*Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on Earth."*

Inertia or motion, it's up to you, but remember you are never in this alone. Your founder knew this even on his deathbed when he said those gathered around, "My friends, the best thing is that God is with us. "