

Worship and Sermon Starters

When using *A Disciple's Heart* in a church-wide initiative, worship becomes the centering place for the entire congregation. The worship service is designed to bring those who are participating in small groups and those who are not into a shared understanding of Christian perfection as the process by which we are continually formed into the likeness of Christ. In worship you have the opportunity to interpret the theme for that week's study in the unique context of your particular congregation.

The pastor and worship team will need to determine if the worship service is designed to precede or follow the small group discussions for that week. The *Daily Workbook* and *Companion Reader* can be sources for interpretation of the text and illustrations. You will want to consider these questions in your planning:

- What does our congregation need to learn about this week's subject?
- How does this week's theme speak to our congregation at this time?
- What difference will it make in our congregation to live into this week's study?
- What are the desired outcome and the mood of each service?
- How will we invite people to respond?

A Disciple's Heart Sermon Series

What follows is a potential outline for a seven-week worship series (one introductory sermon plus six sermons focused on the six weeks of the study). Feel free to pick and choose from these suggestions, modifying the sermon and worship ideas as you wish for your particular congregation.

Introductory Week

Suggested Sermon Title: The Heart of the Matter

Text: Ezekiel 36:26, Luke 6:43-45

Like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*, we need the inner transformation that Ezekiel described as a spiritual heart transplant. In the Wesleyan tradition, the heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart—a heart that is being formed into the likeness of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us.

Luke placed the words of Jesus about the importance of the heart (Luke 6:45) immediately following his words that establish love in human relationships as the defining characteristic of his disciples' lives (Luke 6:27-36). Matthew placed these words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:43-48), concluding with the call to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48 NRSV). The setting indicates that the goal of the transformed heart is a life that looks like the life Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount.

This sermon will need to introduce Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection as the process by which the Holy Spirit does the work of heart transformation in each disciple.

Depending on the needs of the congregation, it could be a teaching sermon that lays the biblical and theological basis for *A Disciple's Heart*. It also could be a motivational sermon that inspires people with the vision of a life of discipleship that is "going on to perfection."

If your church has done the study *A Disciple's Path*, the pastor will want to draw from that experience to invite people to take the next step toward a deeper life of love and grace. This might be the opportunity for a personal witness from someone in the congregation about his or her own journey of discipleship. Charles Wesley's hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" captures the meaning of the journey in a powerful way.

Week 1: Where Do We Go from Here?

Suggested Sermon Title: Called to Rise

Text: Colossians 3:1-17, Mark 16:1-20

In her poem “We Never Know How High We Are,” Emily Dickinson conveys the idea that we never know all that we are capable of being until we are “called to rise.” We never know all that we can be until something or someone calls us to come up higher, to live more boldly, to love more deeply, to give ourselves more freely. We never know all that God has for us until we hear Christ calling us—the way he called his first disciples—to rise up and follow him. Then we discover that there is more to who we are—more to life itself— than we had known or settled for before.

The fishermen heard that call beside the Sea of Galilee and rose up to follow Jesus. Because they said yes to his call, they discovered a new life they otherwise never would have known.

Paul offers that same call to the Colossians with his bold challenge, “Therefore if you were raised with Christ, look for the things that are above” (Colossians 3:1 CEB). He called them to rise above the mundane, ordinary ways of living in order to be conformed to the likeness of Christ, and he described that new life in very specific ways.

Our journey of discipleship begins when we hear that same call and choose to follow Jesus. The call may come to different people in very different ways, but it is an invitation to follow Jesus in a way that leads toward what John Wesley called holiness, Christian perfection, or “being made perfect in love.”

While perfection is always the work of God’s grace in our lives through the Holy Spirit, it is a work in which we participate as we practice the essential disciplines by which we are formed into followers of Jesus whose lives are centering on loving God and loving others. The response to the message could include the Wesley Covenant Prayer.

Week 2: Walking the Way of Salvation

Suggested Sermon Title: Walking the Way of Salvation

Text: Romans 5:6-17

What does it mean to be *saved*? The primary purpose of this sermon is to help people understand that salvation is not a one-time event (such as being vaccinated) but an ongoing process by which we are brought into a new and ever-growing relationship with Christ. It also is an opportunity to underscore the uniquely Wesleyan understanding of grace. The sermon could be structured around prevenient, justifying (converting), and sanctifying grace or around the “Three Tenses of Salvation” (Week 2, Day 2).

The words of William H. Willimon that are quoted in Week 2 of the *Daily Workbook* describe the invitation for each person to say yes to God’s work of salvation. Wherever we are in our discipleship journey, we are always called to take the next step toward a life that is centering in loving God and loving others.

With this week’s emphasis on the sacraments, it would be appropriate for the worship service to include the opportunity for the reaffirmation of baptismal vows or Holy Communion.

Week 3: By the Power of the Spirit

Suggested Sermon Title: Shall We Dance?

Text: John 14:16-17

Trinity is not as much a concept to be explained as it is a reality to be experienced. Preachers need to acknowledge the weakness of our attempts to explain the Trinity even as we invite people to celebrate the mystery of it.

This week's study refers to the most common analogies for the Trinity, which are the chemical equation for water and the relationships of son-husband-father. If the church is equipped with screens, you also could show some of the symbolic or artistic attempts to describe the Trinity as a triangle or three-interlinking circles. The *Daily Workbook* refers to the *Untermeyer Fountain* with its *Three Dancing Maidens* as a visual image of the "dance of the Trinity." Charles Wesley's hymn "Maker, in Whom We Live" could serve as the structural outline for the sermon, both in what it says about the Trinity and the way that we experience it.

The purpose of this week's study is to invite the congregation to experience the Holy Spirit as the power of God's love and grace at work to transform us into the likeness of Christ. The study moves toward a radical response of surrender to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. On Week 3, Day 5 in the *Daily Workbook*, the donkey owners serve as examples of the way every disciple is called to let go of something we hold tightly in surrender to the love of God in Christ. We all have things we need to surrender in order to join the dance of life and love in the Trinity.

The invitation and response could include the singing of gospel hymns such as "Have Thine Own Way, Lord" or "I Surrender All."

Week 4: The Company of the Committed

Suggested Sermon Title: The Company of the Committed

Text: Ephesians 4:1-16

The journey toward perfection is always personal, but it is never private. We make the journey toward perfection in the company of other imperfect disciples. This week's study focuses on the church as the community in which we are encouraged, challenged, supported, and held accountable for our discipleship and through which we become the agents of God's love at work in the world.

Here is one sermon illustration I (Jim) once used to communicate the importance of every individual in the body of Christ:

When you came into the sanctuary this morning, you received a puzzle piece. I pulled this old puzzle out of our kids' closet. It's the colorful picture of a bunch of fish. I suppose the illustration would be better if it were a picture of Jesus, but what you see is what you get. And besides, the fish, *Ichthus* in Greek, was a symbol for the early church, so it's probably okay anyway.

It's obvious that no puzzle piece is like any other. Each one is different and unique. No one piece will reveal the whole picture. It's only when every piece is in its proper relationship with every other piece that the whole picture comes together.

- Imagine that the puzzle piece you hold in your hands represents the unique gifts that the Spirit has placed in your life—the talents, experiences, and background that make you who you are.
- Imagine that the picture on the outside of the puzzle box is what Paul describes as "mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13 CEB).
- Imagine that the world around us will never see the likeness of Jesus unless every individual piece is in its proper place.

The sermon includes this challenge with regard to the importance of every person's gift:

There are children who may never hear the stories of Jesus until some person with the gift of teaching helps them discover it.

There are lost, confused, spiritually searching people who may never experience God's love in Christ until some person with the gift of hospitality welcomes them.

There are adults who long for a deeper understanding of Scripture who may never find it until someone with the gift of wisdom guides them.

There are people with broken hearts and broken lives who may never find healing until people with the gift of mercy reach out to them.

There are new opportunities for ministry that will never be accomplished until people with the gift of leadership show us the way.

There are important issues of poverty, racism, and injustice that will never be confronted until people with the gift of prophecy open our eyes to them.

There are people for whom the love of God will never be made real until some ordinary person releases the gift that God has placed within him or her.

Congregants were encouraged to leave their puzzle piece at the altar when they came for Communion as a sign of a fresh commitment to allow the Spirit of God to use their gifts to make God's love in Christ a tangible reality in this world.

Week 5: On Fire with Holy Love

Suggested Sermon Title: On Fire with Holy Love

Text: Jeremiah 20:7-9

Sanctification is not just about us. Being made perfect in love includes the process by which the Holy Spirit empowers us to be the agents of God's love and grace in the world. The aim of Christian perfection is both a warm heart and a transformed world. Discipleship in the Wesleyan tradition always combines the inner life of personal piety with the outward witness of social action and an evangelistic passion to draw other people into the journey of discipleship. The same love that warmed John Wesley's heart at Aldersgate ignited a flaming passion in his heart to extend that love to everyone in every way that he could. Embedded in the heart of the Wesleyan tradition is the conviction that there are not two gospels—a social gospel and a personal gospel—but only one gospel that transforms the human heart while at the same time that participates in God's transformation of the world through contagious witness and social action.

The story of what happened in Centralia, Pennsylvania, many years ago could serve as a geophysical metaphor of Jeremiah's "fire in the bones." Centralia was a typical coal-mining town with about 1,400 people. On May 27, 1962, in preparation for the Memorial Day parade, the volunteer fire department burned some trash in an abandoned coal pit next to the Odd Fellows Cemetery. They never anticipated that the fire would seep into the seams of anthracite coal that weave their way underground through that part of the country. That fire is still burning. They've never been able to put it out.

To be a disciple in the Wesleyan tradition is to live with a burning passion to be a part of God's healing of a broken world. Let the sermon be an opportunity to tell practical stories about people in and around your congregation who have demonstrated that kind of fire through their witness and service.

You might conclude with an old story about an English bishop who visited a sleepy little parish along the river Thames. The discouraged priest said, "Bishop, I can't say that we are setting the Thames on fire." The Bishop replied, "I am not concerned about setting the Thames on fire. What I want to know is if I drop you in will you sizzle?"

Week 6: All the Way to Heaven

Suggested Sermon Title: All the Way to Heaven

Text: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

The pastor and worship team could begin preparation for this week's worship service by asking: What do the people of this congregation believe about heaven? Consider polling the congregation a few weeks prior to receive their answers. You might discover that their images of heaven are more deeply influenced by cultural traditions than by biblical or theological insight. The basic theme of this week's study is that heaven is the completion of God's saving work in our lives and in this world that begins right now. It is the "end without an ending" toward which the journey of Christian perfection is moving. It is the fulfillment of the prayer that God's kingdom come and God's will be done on earth as in heaven. Followers of Christ are called to live now in ways that are consistent with the way the world will be then. Based on Paul's words to the Corinthians and Karl Barth's memorial sermon for his son, this is the way I (Jim) describe what it means to live at the boundary of *Now* and *Then*.

Now, we see things dimly, like looking at our reflection in a foggy mirror.

Then, on the other side of resurrection, we shall see face to face.

Now, our attempts at living a holy life are incomplete.

Then, our journey toward holiness will be completed.

Now, our understanding is imperfect.

Then, we will understand perfectly even as we have been perfectly understood.

Now, we stand in the darkness of sorrow.

Then, we will walk into the sunlight of resurrection.

Now, we feel the ghastly separation of death.

Then, we will know the fullness of life in Christ.

The border between *Now* and *Then* is where we live out our discipleship and journey toward Christian perfection.

While not neglecting the personal anticipation of "glad reunion" with those we have loved, the material in the *Daily Workbook* and *Companion Reader* also challenges us to become the imperfect agents of God's perfect love in our own time and place.

The mood of the worship service should be hopeful celebration of the promise of heaven along with a bold challenge to live in that hope today. Charles Wesley's hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" expresses this hope.

Finish, then, thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

*From *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 384.