

[PRAYER] [BLANK] One evening in the spring of 1975, I went to the snack bar of my college, more or less randomly. A friend of mine was there, with someone who I had known of, but who I had not met. As I sat down at their table, my friend introduced me to June-Ann. It was one of those moments when you knew that you had just met someone who would change your life. And so she did. I asked June-Ann to marry me in the spring of 1976, and at our college graduation, I asked for her father's permission. He said no. Given that I was a scruffy, long-haired college boy, with fuzzy ideas about responding to a call from God for ministry, I can't say that I could blame him.

That could have been the end of my relationship with June-Ann, but it wasn't. We stayed in love with one another, and in March of 1983, we got married. [PHOTO] I wish that I could give you the fairy tale ending to this story, but I think that many of you know that our deepest love is not about a fairy tale - it's about allowing our love to grow through things, into something bigger than the "happily ever after" of our younger days. So though better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness and health, forsaking all others, we learn new ways to stay in love, a day at a time. And most days, that means remembering the everyday things that matter, and making room for new things that matter. [BLANK]

Stay in love. As the years roll by, it's easy to forget that simple idea. Keep not just happiness alive in your life ever after, but joy, a deep sense of accepting everything that life offers us with abundant, grateful love. Joy is not conditional in the way that happiness can be. Happiness is great, but it tends to be an "if-then" feeling. Turn on the TV, watch a show or a game, and be happy. Happiness gets dispensed from all sorts of places. But joy, deep joy, joy that conquers everything that life can throw at it - that's a pretty rare commodity. Staying in love, through thick and thin, is where we find our joy. And staying in love with God is where we find the most powerful joy of all.

[RULE] Stay in love with God. The best source of the joy that makes life the best that it can be is actually one of the three rules of Methodism. Reuben Job's book "Three Simple Rules" updated the language of John Wesley's General Rules for Methodism, and I really appreciate that. In John Wesley's words, our third General Rule of Methodism asks us to "attend to all the ordinances of God." Now, I know what John Wesley means by this, but this is one place where his language might leave modern Christians a bit cold. It's Wesley's way of reminding us that since the time of the prophets of Israel, our primary command in faith is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our mind, and all of our strength. It is how we are able to love our neighbors as ourselves. Until our love of God rules our hearts, every day, no matter what, we will stumble in doing no harm, and doing good.

[GOLD MARBLE] Like the character Joy in the movie "Inside Out," who experiences the pure joy in a newborn girl, our first love of God is usually a pure love, perfect, glowing with golden memories. My "gold marble" moment with God was my baptism at nineteen months. Somehow, even now, I have some very clear memories of my earliest life, and I remember the wonder and awe of God's Holy Spirit warming my heart when the water flowed over my head. But as with the movie, my relationship with God

grew and changed, as I grew and changed. [MIXED MARBLES], the “marbles” of my memories of being with God had many emotions coloring them, including sadness, anger, fear, disgust. But the joy of loving God helps to change the color of those memories. The pictures of my memories don’t fade, but staying in love with God changes how I see them, and use them. [BLANK]

Like in a marriage, staying in love with God is no accident. It’s a discipline. And John Wesley knew that there are a few important things keep the discipline of loving God in our lives. [WORSHIP] Public worship on a consistent and persistent basis is a sign that we want to stay in love with God. My wife doesn’t make tea for me just when she feels like it, and I don’t send her hugs and kisses in my notes just when I feel like it. We keep showing up for one another with our hearts, knowing that keeping our hearts present makes our covenant relationship ready for joy, no matter what. We come here in worship to support one another in our faith, so that we can all find that joy when we need it most.

[BIBLE] Reading and proclaiming the word of God. Unfortunately, reading the Bible for many people is just a matter of education, of knowing and understanding words. But the Bible is not just words. It’s God’s love letter to us for all time. The Bible is the revelation of God’s plan for the salvation of all of creation, including you. God ministers to us through the Bible in love, and we can minister to others through sharing God’s love revealed in it. If we’re wondering “where is the joy in my life?,” reading the Bible, both alone and in fellowship with other people, helps us to find God’s answers to where our joy is. The writers of Psalm 119 understood this big-time. It’s 176 verses makes it the longest chapter in the Bible by far - and every word of it is a passionate love letter to the God of our salvation. If ever you want to know what it feels like to stay in love with God, Read Psalm 119 out loud, end to end. When we stay in love with God’s word, we will begin to be a witness to the joy in those words. When life is challenging, Wesley advises us to search the scriptures, to help God to minister to us in our time of need, so we can reclaim the joy of our faith patiently, and with hope.

[COMMUNION] Wesley saw Holy Communion as a very important way of staying in love with God. He advises us to take part in it whenever you can. I can’t wait to finally get licensed to consecrate my own communion elements, so that I can make Communion available whenever and wherever I can help people to stay in love with God. The Lord’s Supper is our constant reminder that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God will never give up calling us to stay in love with God. We invite God’s Holy Spirit to the table to seal God’s promises offered through the body and blood of Christ. Through God’s grace, our hearts may be warmed by God’s joy in them, as they help to transform us into the body of Christ, redeemed by God to spread the love of God everywhere. The disciples of Jesus saw Jesus revealed to him after Jesus broke bread with them on the road to Emmaus. If we want to stay in love with God, we should do the same.

[PRAYER GROUP] Stay in love with God through prayer, Wesley tells us, both with your family and with yourself and others in private. If we wonder, “Why doesn’t God speak to me?,” you have to ask yourself, “When’s the last time that you talked to God?”

Regular prayers like the Lord's Prayers are good, and one of the special joys of my family life is saying a wonderful special blessing over our family meals together. But I also want to encourage you to stay in love with God through prayer in ways that invite a conversation with God. Tell God about your day. Share all of the colors of your emotions with God. Most people will do this alone, but I also want to encourage you to consider doing this in fellowship with other Christians.

[CLASS WINDOW] One of our most neglected traditions of Methodism is our original system of small group fellowships that Wesley called "classes." They weren't classes in the way that we think of that word today - they were weekly meetings when people told one another how it was going with their souls, and encouraged one another with prayers, searching the scriptures for guidance, and encouraging them on a path towards loving God. For a long time, Wesley's classes were the core of Methodism - to be a Methodist was to be in a Wesley fellowship class! [DISCIPLINE - CLASS] They were so important for staying in love with God that Wesley instructs us in the preamble of the General Rules to make the classes the fundamental building block for practicing the three simple rules of Methodism. In the months ahead, I hope that we can all consider how reviving this Methodist tradition can help us to move forward as a church. United Methodist Churches that have revived Wesley's classes are experiencing significant growth, and I think that it's for a good reason: they really help us to stay in love with God.

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Like those disciples on the road to Emmaus, we may be tempted to leave our love of God behind, make it a thing of the past, when our joys were all like golden marbles. But God doesn't give up on us that easily. God walks with us, just like Jesus walks with us now, speaking to us through the scriptures, and warming our hearts with the joy of God's salvation promises. Will we turn to Jesus when we feel that warmth, and invite Jesus into our lives? Will we find the courage through faith to stay in love with God, and to grow in God's grace to reclaim God's joy? Our answers to these questions will shape our place in salvation history, forever.

Our season of Pentecost is ending. The fires of the Holy Spirit, kindled twenty-five weeks ago, are giving way to the hopeful light of starry nights. The coming of the Christ-child, our king of love, is near. Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. It takes just three simple rules to be a real Christian. Do them together. Do them with your family. Do them alone. Do them with the world. Let the world know that being a Methodist Christian really matters. Because it really does. Amen.