

7-25-21 “Back to Eden” Joel Graff

I always enjoy sermons that include a hefty dose of storytelling. However, as I prepared to speak today, I felt a little bit like Snoopy from the Peanuts cartoons. You might remember that he started typing up every story with, “It was a dark and stormy night.” The difference between me and Snoopy is that all the stories I could think of started with, “So, I was on Facebook once and...”

Anyway, so I was on Facebook once and someone posted a meme that said, “Describe your job, funnily.” I decided that this meme-based discussion prompt was actually worth my time. I mean, how often in your life have you been asked what you do (or did) as a career? After some thinking, I decided to respond that, “Students pay a lot to hear me speak. The university system lets me have some of that money.”

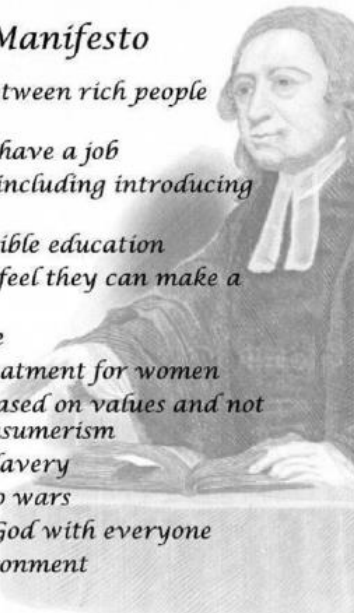
I’m looking forward to hearing your funny explanation of what you do or did as a career but think about that later, please...I’m trying to give a sermon here.

It’s been since the middle of April since I have given a good, old-fashioned college lecture. My apologies ahead of time because that’s basically what you are in for. I have my PowerPoint slides and even a handout in your bulletin ready to go.

One thing that has been lost in our weekly worship service somewhere along the way is the “Rooted” segment. That brief interlude where we would stop and discuss some historical aspect of the United Methodist tradition or church history.

John Wesley’s Manifesto

1. *Reduce the gap between rich people and poor people*
2. *Help everyone to have a job*
3. *Help the poorest, including introducing a living wage*
4. *Offer the best possible education*
5. *Help everyone to feel they can make a difference*
6. *Promote tolerance*
7. *Promote equal treatment for women*
8. *Create a society based on values and not on profits and consumerism*
9. *End all forms of slavery*
10. *Avoid getting into wars*
11. *Share the love of God with everyone*
12. *Care for the environment*



So, I was on Facebook once and I saw a meme that was titled “John Wesley’s Manifesto”. It caught my eye seeing how John was the founder of methodism and all that. Maybe it could be the topic of a “Rooted” segment at church if they ever make the mistake of asking me to give a sermon again!

If you had not heard of John Wesley’s Manifesto before today, don’t feel too bad. John Wesley never heard of it either.

“What is this Facebook meme all about?” I asked myself.

(Also, I like to look up anything and everything on the Google machine and here was another rabbit hole I could go down. What luck!)

It turns out, the John Wesley Manifesto was written only a few years ago by a historian at the New Room Bristol (aka John Wesley’s chapel). In contrast to the manifesto, John Wesley was familiar with this chapel. It is the oldest Methodist building in the world...built in 1739.

From the website for the “New Room”, I learned that this building is where John Wesley met with religious societies to organize such activities as offering food and clothing to the poor, running a school for children, arranging visits to the nearby prison, and helping the sick by running a free medical dispensary. This tidbit of information seems like a perfect segue to simply read those 12 lines that you have probably already read in the handout found from today’s bulletin.

1. Reduce the gap between rich and poor.
2. Seek to ensure full employment.
3. Introduce measures to help the poorest, including a living wage.
4. Offer the best possible education.
5. Empower individuals to feel they can make a difference.
6. Promote tolerance.
7. Promote equal treatment for women.
8. Create a society based on values and not on profits and consumerism.
9. End all forms of enslavement.
10. Avoid engaging in wars.
11. Avoid narrow self-interest and promote a world view.
12. Care for the animals with whom we share our planet.

If John Wesley didn’t know about “John Wesley’s Manifesto”, where did the historian come up with this stuff? It turns out that the 12 bullet points of the manifesto are paraphrased versions of actual John Wesley quotes.

Okay. Okay. I’ve given you a nice list of lofty principles/goals. What do we do with this information? To get to that, I first need to tell you another story.



So, I was on Facebook once when I ran across the topic of the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (or SDGs as the cool kids call them). I know what you are thinking, “Oh no! Another list of lofty goals.”

(If you can’t read the monitors, you can catch these goals on the flip side of your bulleting insert.)

At the risk of being accused of mimicking David Letterman and basing half my material off lists, I’m going to read the goals anyway...

1. No poverty
2. Zero hunger
3. Good health and well-being
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequalities
11. Sustainable cities and communities

- 12. Responsible consumption and production
- 13. Climate action
- 14. Life below water
- 15. Life on land
- 16. Peace, justice, and strong institutions
- 17. Partnerships for the goals

The parallels between John Wesley’s Manifesto and the SDGs are striking. I told Matthias a couple months ago about this observation and bragged that I could probably squeeze many sermons out of it. So here I am, putting my money where my mouth is.

There are also differences between the lists. For example, there is an SDG regarding climate action and that was not on John Wesley’s radar...but to be fair, John lived in the 1700s. It wasn’t until 1856 that the American scientist, Eunice Foote, published her observation that carbon dioxide absorbs heat faster than many other atmospheric gases and, later, in the 1860s that Irish scientist, John Tyndale, verified Eunice’s experiments and pointed out that burning fossil fuels could lead to global climate change.

(Good thing we’ve had over 150 years to understand and accept this basic scientific concept!)

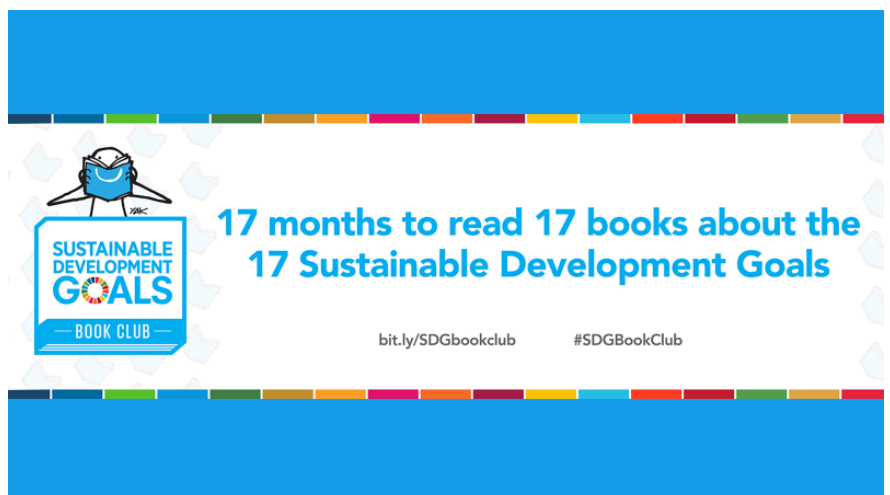
Instead of dwelling on the similarities and differences of these lists, I would like to return to the question of what we do with a long list of the lofty goals in John Wesley’s manifesto. Well, what has the UN done with its list of SDGs?



1. The UN highlighted a “Goal of the Month”. Seventeen goals are difficult to take in all at once, so they spread them out to provide time for considering each goal individually.

What if Aldersgate and other UMCs did this with JW’s Manifesto? Twelve months in a year and twelve bullet points in JW’s manifesto can’t be a coincidence. January is “Reduce the gap between rich people and poor people” month! Who’s with me?

2. Continuing with the idea of having one SDG highlighted each month, they helped organize book clubs with the idea of having “17 months to read 17 books about 17 Sustainable Development Goals”.

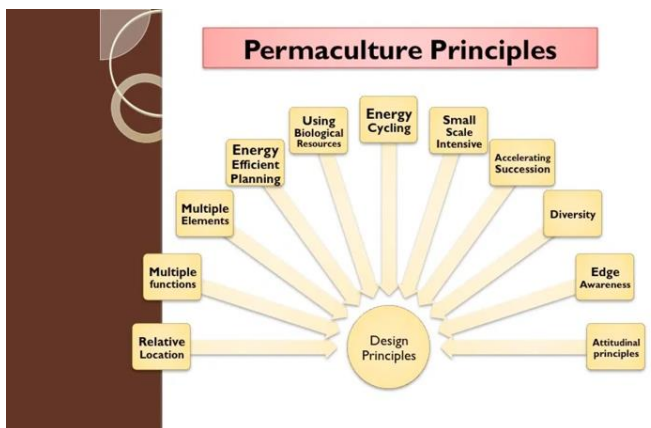


What if Aldersgate and other UMCs planned out a book club to cover the 12 principles of JW’s Manifesto?

UNITED STATES		Performance by Indicator	
SDG1 – No Poverty			
Poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90/day (%)	04 2021	↑	67.3 2019
Poverty headcount ratio at \$3.20/day (%)	03 2021	↑	15.2 2019
Poverty rate after taxes and transfers (%)	17.8 2017	↓	4.0 2018
SDG2 – Zero Hunger			
Prevalence of undernourishment (%)	2.5 2018	↑	94.7 2021
Prevalence of stunting in children under 5 years of age (%)	3.5 2016	↑	1.3 2018
Prevalence of wasting in children under 5 years of age (%)	04 2016	↑	2.8 2016
Prevalence of obesity, BMI ≥ 30 (% of adult population)	36.2 2016	↓	9.2 2017
Human Development Index (Best 2–3 word)	2.5 2019	↓	39.0 2016
Cereal yield tonnes per hectare of harvested land	8.7 2018	↑	26.9 2019
Sustainable Nitrogen Management Index (Best 2–3 word)	0.3 2015	↑	34.0 2016
Yield gap closure (% of potential yield)	77.6 2015	↓	
Exports of hazardous pesticides (tonnes per million population)	214 2018	↓	
SDG3 – Good Health and Well-Being			
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births)	19 2017	↓	46.1 2013
Neonatal mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	1.4 2016	↓	1.8 2011
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	1.4 2016	↓	23.1 2017
SDG9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure			
Population using the Internet (%)		↑	87.3 2019
Mobile broadband subscriptions (per 100 population)		↑	15.2 2019
Logistics Performance Index: Quality of trade and transport-related infrastructure (score 1–5 best)		↑	4.0 2018
The Times Higher Education Universities Ranking: Average score of top 3 universities (score 0–100 best)		↑	94.7 2021
Scientific and technical journal articles (per 1,000 population)		↑	1.3 2018
Expenditure on research and development (% of GDP)		↑	2.8 2016
Researchers (per 1,000 employed population)		↑	9.2 2017
Trade patent families filed (per million population)		↑	39.0 2016
Gap in internet access by income (percentage points)		↑	26.9 2019
Female share of graduates from STEM fields at the tertiary level (%)		↑	34.0 2016
SDG10 – Reduced Inequalities			
Gini coefficient (adjusted for top income)		↓	46.1 2013
Palmu ratio		↓	1.8 2011
Elderly poverty rate (% of population aged 65 or over)		↓	23.1 2017

3. Because the SDGs are so lofty, each SDG had a set of subgoals (or targets) that provided some specific information about each SDG. For example, SDG # 1 is “End Poverty” and SDG subgoal 1.1 is “By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day (in 2015 value).” Moreover, as this slide shows, each country that committed to the SDGs is regularly evaluated to measure whether they were on track to meeting the SDG subgoals.

What if Aldersgate and other UMCs wrestled with each of the 12 principles in JW’s manifesto to come up with subgoals? And what if those subgoals were tracked to determine if progress is being made?



4. Many nonprofits and other nongovernmental organizations got on board with the UN’s SDGs. They did this by analyzing their organization’s activities and highlighting the specific SDGs that they were helping to address. This information was promoted in their public relations materials.

Ensuring that nonprofits and NGOs are aligned with as many SDGs as possible is reminiscent of permaculture design principles #2 and #3.

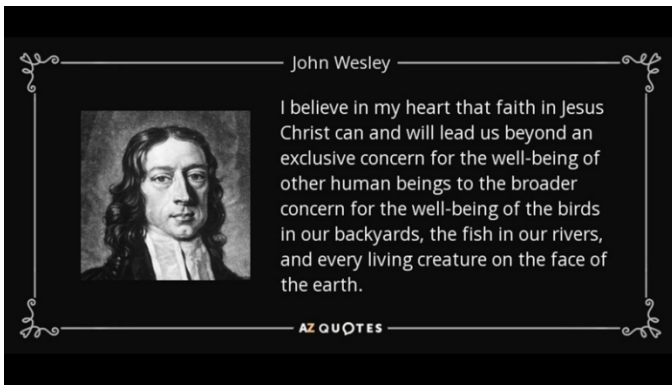
(yes...another list, but I won’t read them all.) Permaculture is a philosophy, I guess you could say, that promotes sustainability.

Anyway, on this slide, design principle #2 states “Multiple functions”, which is kind of vague, but it means that each element in a system (e.g. activity by humans) should provide multiple functions. Design principle #3 states “Multiple elements” and this means that each function should be supported by multiple elements in the system.

The importance of permaculture design principles #2 and #3 is that they provide resiliency to the system. In our case, “the system’s resiliency” refers to Aldersgate’s members, committees, and property as a whole. The interconnected nature of this way of thinking makes organizations stronger.

What if Aldersgate and other UMCs followed permaculture design principle #2 to make sure that each activity/program they put effort towards was able to supporting multiple goals in JW’s Manifesto?

What if Aldersgate and other UMCs followed permaculture design principle #3 to make sure that each goal of JW’s Manifesto was supported by multiple activities/programs?



5. If you at John Wesley's quote that led to the historian coming up with "Care for the environment" (JW manifesto #12), you would find the words on this slide. "I believe in my heart that faith in Jesus Christ can and will lead us beyond an exclusive concern for the well-being of other human beings to the broader concern for the well-being of the birds in our backyards, the fish in our rivers, and every living creature on the face of the earth."

In my research for this sermon, I found several surveys showing that climate change and other environmental concerns are at the top of the list for Millennials and Generation Z. SDG #13 (climate action) and at least half of the other SDGs are related to caring for the environment. Millennials and Generation Z seem to be correct to have "care for the environment" as their top concern.

What if Aldersgate and other UMCs took this particular concern of younger generations more seriously? Maybe by taking up the task of caring for the environment and making it well known that creation care is a top priority of ours, Aldersgate could reach a wider swath of these younger generations.

This lecture...I mean sermon...is getting a bit long-winded, so I will wrap this up by spending the second half of the time talking about #12 from JW's Manifesto (care for the environment).

So, I was on Facebook once and I received a comment about one of my (many) environmental posts. The person argued from the familiar "God gave us dominion over the Earth" view to essentially say it was OK if the environment was being degraded and that species are becoming extinct at an ever-increasing rate because humans are special in God's eyes. This person even went so far as to suggest that maybe if the environment got too messed up, Jesus might hasten his promise to come again to save us!

Because some version of the "God gave us dominion" argument is so common when it comes to discussion about Christians and environmental issues, I decided to look it up in the Bible. I'm not a biblical scholar by any means but it seemed likely that this "dominion" business was mentioned to Adam and Eve, so I turned to Genesis chapter two and started reading.

God put Adam in the Garden of Eden to "work it and keep it". (Genesis 2:15-17)

Then, in the third chapter of Genesis, God kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, but because God was upset/disappointed the language became much more "grounded". As in, the description of the work turned to "working the ground/soil" and the working of the soil became "toiling", which has a decidedly more negative connotation of "working".

I hadn't found the dominion description yet, so I kept on reading Genesis while keeping an eye out for anything related to humans and the environment.

Up next, Cain, the poor guy who "toiled in the soil" didn't produce as pleasing of offerings to God as his brother, Abel, the rancher. In dismay, Cain soaked the ground with Abel's blood and the ground became cursed.

The cursed ground is brought up again when Noah was born as God proclaimed in the 5th chapter of Genesis, “Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.” How about that? The painful toiling of the soil was going to come to an end!

Skipping forward to the resolution of the great flood scene, God again made a proclamation, ““I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

My understanding here is a bit confused by the fact that, in Chapter 5, God told us Noah’s life was going to bring us relief from having to work the cursed soil, but in Chapter 8, God seems to be saying that the ground is not cursed anymore and will not be cursed again, which implies that “toiling in the soil” is a thing of the past yet seedtime and harvest shall not cease. Could it be both? Seedtime and harvest without the toil?

So, I was on YouTube once...you thought I was going to say Facebook, didn’t you? So, I was on YouTube once watching my favorite gardening channels when I ran across the concept of “Back to Eden” gardening.

Alright! Another rabbit hole to fall down! What is this “Back to Eden” gardening method all about? Challenge accepted!

It quickly became apparent that all “Back to Eden” gardening roads led to Paul Gautschi, a very interesting fellow who gardens on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state. I find Paul fascinating because he has a peculiar speaking pattern where he switches from talking about gardening to quoting scripture very rapidly and throws in his conversations with God to tie it all together.

If you want to know more about Paul Gautschi, you should watch the “Back to Eden” documentary. I’ll summarize some of it here:

Paul was frustrated with gardening. He was toiling in the soil just like everyone else seemed to do in their gardens but, through careful observation, he could tell that gardening was becoming more difficult year by year. He went on to have several conversations with God where God was hinting to him that he was gardening all wrong. Paul became even more frustrated because he had already concluded that he was gardening wrong.

Enlightenment eventually came to Paul when he escaped his garden to walk in the forest and realized the forest floor contained amazingly good soil. “That’s it!” he thought. “God set up nature to be bountiful and sustainable without tilling the soil!” Long story short, Paul decided to model his gardening technique (named Back to Eden) by mimicking the natural world. This didn’t end his work in the garden, but it did relieve him from toiling in the soil as he began using deep layers of mulch to turn his compacted/rototilled soil into fertile soil by encouraging the soil food web one would find in the soil of a forest to his garden by mimicking God’s method of laying down wood chips made from tree branches.

Now you’re thinking, “Hey, weren’t you going to attempt to figure out this whole dominion thing?” Sure. Let’s do it.

I made my way through Genesis chapter 10 without finding the word “dominion”. If you’ve been taking notes of this lecture...I mean sermon, you would remember that I had started with Adam and Eve in chapter 2.

Could it be in chapter 1? Yep.

Of course, you know about chapter 1...God had spent some time putting fish in the sea, birds in the air, plants and animals on land, and finally humans.

And what did God think of all these things that he created? They were good!

What else did God say when he created humans? He said, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

And God also said, "'Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.'" And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

Our scripture reading today (Psalm 8) wrestled with the idea that all of God's creation is good but that humans have the unimaginably huge responsibility of caring for creation.

Circling back to chapter 2, I will remind you that God put Adam in the Garden of Eden to "work it and keep it". Keep it! Keep it what? Good.

How are we doing with our dominion duties? Well, we are witnessing the 6th mass extinction in Earth's history. All those birds, fish, plants, and animals that God declared to be good are going kaput. Why? Many reasons:

1. The atmosphere is heating up just like those scientists from the 1800s predicted.
2. The ocean is acidifying.
3. The human population has eclipsed 7 billion.
4. The methods we use to farm and ranch have led to lost or degraded soils everywhere.
5. Natural areas have been broken up into fragments.
6. And the list goes on.

How is it that this is not front and center for all Christians?

I have left this quote from John Wesley up for the majority of the lecture...I mean sermon. How can we, as a church, help with "Care for the environment" (JW Manifesto #12)?

I don't pretend to have all the answers and I don't think we have time to discuss it all right now. Should we have "care for the environment" be a goal of the month to think deeply about? Should it be the topic of a book club? Should we as a church create SMART subgoals to caring for the environment...where SMART is an acronym for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based? Should the Ad council and other church committees make a commitment to keeping JW's Manifesto in mind when prioritizing our activities? Finally, would it help Aldersgate reach out to and engage Millennials and Generation Z?

If I ask myself these questions, I say yes to everyone of them. But I'm not Aldersgate, I'm just one small slice of Aldersgate. I'll leave each of you to ask these questions to yourself and discuss your answers with other members of our church family.