

The Methodist History of the Sunday School Movement
August 27, 2023 Montavilla and Tabor Heights United Methodist Church
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Exodus 1:8—2:10

Pharaoh's daughter takes Moses in

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This

must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, wrote in his sermon, "On the Education of Children." "Some of the best parents have the worst children¹. I appreciate Wesley's gesture of compassion for parents, because most parents today feel like we're failing.

I love America Ferrera's monologue in the Barbie Movie, because it so eloquently addresses how much of a no-win situation life has become for working mothers.

It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong.

You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin. You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas. You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time. You have to be a career woman but also always be looking out for other people.

You have to answer for men's bad behavior, which is insane, but if you point that out, you're accused of complaining. You're supposed to stay pretty for men, but not so pretty that you tempt them too much or that you threaten other women because you're supposed to be a part of the sisterhood...But always stand out... And always be grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged. So find a way to acknowledge that but also always be grateful.

You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line.

¹ John Wesley, Sermon 95 "On the Education of Children," *Global Ministries*, Accessed, November 23, 2015 <http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/Sermon-95-On-the-Education-of-Children>

It's too hard! It's too contradictory and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you! And it turns out in fact that not only are you doing everything wrong, but also everything is your fault.

I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing women, then I don't even know. (*Barbie* 2023)

And as a woman who is fortunate enough to have a husband who has always been my full partner in parenting our children, I can also say that the pressure to work like you don't have a family and parent like you don't have a job is something that more fathers are also feeling.

In addition to feeling like an utter failure all the time, today's parents are also facing the very uneven fallout of pandemic schooling, the very real fear of school shootings, heightened pressures of social comparison fueled by social media, irrational politics that have infiltrated local school boards, and legislation that makes seeking lifesaving healthcare for mothers and children illegal in some states!

Oh and also, the looming threat of climate change that has already passed the point of no return, threatening to make our planet uninhabitable for human life.

If your socio-economic status is middle class or higher, then you can attempt to protect your children by choosing private schools, living in safer areas, and providing your kids with lots of enriching extracurricular activities so that they can get into the best schools, so that they can get into the best jobs, so that they will hopefully have enough money to insulate them from the worst of life. Which is part of why parents with children are not usually at church. Spiritual development doesn't figure into the capitalist equation for financial security.

When parents and children do come to church I try my hardest to teach them about Sabbath because they are soooo tired! And about their fundamental God-given enough-ness, and belovedness. And about the importance of the combination of justice, grace and compassion that we call neighbor-love. I also try to teach that money is just a tool that can be used for good or evil and a whole lot of neutral stuff. Money is NOT the goal or the measure of a successful life.

But honestly a lot of families are just in survival mode. Working multiple jobs, juggling bills and pasting childcare together out of odd schedules, grandparents and way too much screen time.

John Wesley was interested in the education of children because in the mid-1700's there were no public schools. Most children were educated at home then sent to private boarding school or into an apprenticeship. There were Parish schools at the Churches sponsored by owners of great estates for the village and farm workers' children to attend, but as industrial production began to replace agricultural work, there was a growing worker class where the whole family, including children, labored in coal mines and cotton mills 10-15 hours a day, 6 days a week leaving no time for the school room.

Methodist and Presbyterian groups had compassion for these workers and began to form "Sunday Schools" - so named because the schools met on Sundays. Sunday was the only day off that industrial workers had in these days before the labor movement. Next week I'll share some of John Wesley's thoughts on the labor movement!

Today, when we hear the term Sunday School, we think of an hour long Bible study on a Sunday morning. But the original Sunday School movement was primarily about basic education. The purpose of these early Sunday Schools was to provide general and religious education for children of working parents and develop the moral character of future citizens². After all, "illiterate people cannot read the Bible³.

Robert Raikes, a newspaper publisher, is credited with starting the first Sunday school in 1780, in the slum of Gloucester, England near a prison in an area where employees of a pin factory lived⁴.

Methodists soon saw the benefit of Sunday Schools and established many more. Methodists also tended to hire, "predominantly working class," Sunday school teachers and created a sort of proto-benefit plan of a benevolence fund that teachers could pay into and access when sick or retired.⁵

Sunday schools were free to all students because local Methodist societies and Presbyterian churches supported the schools with the use of church spaces and with donations that paid for supplies and teachers wages.

By the early 1900's public schools and child labor laws - both inspired by the Sunday School movement, shifted the original intent of Sunday schools into the time for faith and character formation that we recognize as Sunday school today.

² Nelson, 38.

³ Wellings, Forsaith, and Gibson.

⁴ Carl Ellis Nelson, "Has the Sunday school movement played out." *Austin Seminary Bulletin (Faculty Ed.)* 99, no. 8 (May 1984): 37-44. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost, accessed November 23, 2015, 38.

⁵ Wellings, Forsaith, and Gibson.

I'm fascinated by this moment in Methodist history for a couple of reasons.

Methodists and Presbyterians were willing to lay down their very contentious argument about predestination versus free will, to work together to support Sunday Schools, and The Sunday School movement is a great example of one of those moments in history when the Church truly lived out the gospel as "good news" for the poor.

For today's parents whose children live under the constant threat of gun violence, lack of necessary healthcare, lack of access to affordable housing, and rising cost of living, there are days when Parents can feel like we are living under the reign of a Pharaoh who, if not ordering the death of our children, certainly doesn't care enough to enact the ridiculously simple and proven methods of preventing death and harm that we already know work in other places.

The question that I have for The United Methodist Church, and for us, here our local churches is:

Do we want to side with the Pharaoh's of this world who are willing to sacrifice the lives of our children for the sake of preserving the status quo or trying to go back to some imagined previous era of American Moral authority?

-or-

Do we want to side with Pharaoh's daughter, and be the kind of people who pull children out of the rushing water, even though saving that child could be considered an act of civil disobedience.

The early Methodist Sunday School movement was a Pharaoh's daughter kind of thing to do.

Sunday school teachers worked on the Sabbath. - that wasn't exactly legal.

Educating factory workers led to the ability to read and write and do math which gave common workers the tools to found the labor movement - which wasn't exactly legal, until we made it legal.

Educating girls and women gave women the tools to create women's clubs who met in Methodist church basements to strategize on how to get votes for women - which wasn't legal until women made it legal.

When churches live out the gospel as good news that actually makes a difference in people's lives, a lot of people want to be a part of that! So the churches who are making a difference tend to grow. Just as the churches who participated in the Sunday School movement grew while those who opposed Sunday school⁶ declined.

And yes, there always seems to be opposition when we decide to make the gospel good news for the poor. Even for something as obvious to us as the benefits of a religious Sunday School.

A particular Church of the Brethren congregation recorded in their Council minutes in the 1860's: we are, "not responsible for other parents' children⁷." Some Brethren were so opposed to the Sunday School movement, especially the eccumenical American Sunday School Union, that they said it was "of Satan⁸" because it was not specifically commanded by scripture, whereas teaching one's own children the faith is.

The truth is, it's a lot easier for a church to just coast along and accept things as they are, even though we may not like Pharaoh's rules, than to be like Pharaoh's daughter and pull people out of the flood of injustice, violence and poverty.

It was hard for the Churches who shared their space Sunday Schools.

They had to be done with church in time for class to start.

They had to provide storage space for the school supplies

They had to get used to having people in their building who behaved differently

They had to get used to the neighbors complaining about the noise when school let out in the evening.

Since schools often provided a meal, they had to share their kitchen.

And I imagine that when those rough coal miners' and factory workers' families started coming to church that some parents weren't sure how they felt about their children spending time with "those kids."

It might seem a little ironic, but, when churches are feeling uncomfortable because their ministries keep creating new challenges, that's actually a really good problem to have. It's a sign that we're doing something right.

So Methodists, do you want to be comfortable friend of Pharaoh, or do you want to get wet with his daughter?

⁶ Thompson, 228.

⁷ Thompson, 223-224.

⁸ Thompson, 223-4.