Bless This Land to Which We're Bound:

An Expanded Understanding of Wesleyan Sanctification for Rural Renewal

By

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Abstract

Rural communities regularly deal with external forces attempting to define and control them. This along with the regular loss of rural industry and culture due to economic and societal shifts often lead to disruption of rural culture and place. However, for rural communities to thrive they must claim and name their own identity and live into a future with hope. Thankfully, many rural communities hold a deep understanding and attachment to place. Utilizing and expanding on John Wesley's notion of sanctification and deliverance, rural communities can harness the latent hope present in their communities toward sanctification not just of persons but of place. Expanding on Wesley's understanding of means and grace and holy tempers to include rural practices, traditions, and innovations along with engaging Jacques Derrida's notion of relaunching heritage (expanded to relaunching place in this paper) allows for creative practices of hope that enable communities to explore and relaunch their understanding of place through a lens of love. For this paper, outdoor Christmas lights and covered dish meals at churches serve as examples of latent hope which rural communities can creatively relaunch as means of grace for transformation of persons and place. Alongside hope, this paper explores some of the ways these means of grace might even disrupt hauntedness and suffering, transforming them into joy and new life.

Bless this land to which we're bound
By gravity of joyful sound
Feed the hearth and feed the herd
Hope must stand on every word.

-Emily Scott Robinson[1]

As a newly licensed teenager, I would regularly drive the long way when I would run an errand, come home from an afterschool activity, or need time think as I tried to figure out who I was and where my life was headed. I regularly drove the same roads, past the homes of friends and family, past old schools and places my parents worked. As I grew older, I would add new roads and venues to my route. Even when I came home from college or a visit after I had long since moved to my new home and job, I would drive these old routes. Sometimes, I still drive these roads to think, clear my head, and pray. I note the changes over time, the things that have endured through these changes, and the connection between my soul and this rural place.[2]

Rural education scholar, Michael Corbett writes about this connection to place as part of a collection of rural virtues.[3] These virtues include in stewardship, deep place sensitive knowledge, and the ability to make do as they see fit, rural communities offer the potential for a resilience and hope beyond the often-bleak image of rural life that greater society paints. Beyond

[1] Emily Scott Robinson, featuring Lizzy Ross and Alisa Amador. 2022. "Men and Moons" Recorded May 2022 on *Built on Bones.* Oh Boy! Records. Vinyl Recording.

[2] As I write, I do want to note that I am primarily focused on and familiar with rural realities in The United States but have found through conversations and study that many rural communities, regardless of region or nation, truly do face similar issues and have similar opportunities for hope.

[3] Michael Corbett, "Social Class, the Commodification of Education, and Space Through a Rural Lens" in *Dynamics of Social Class, Race, and Place in Rural Education,* Eds. Craig B. Howley, Aimee Howley, and Jerry D. Johnson (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2014) 32-25.

this analytic approach, country and folk music singers often paint a picture of country folks' deep connection to place, and how that connection is what sustains them. My desire to regularly drive the roads of my youth is an expression of this deep connection to place, and perhaps, even an act of grace that empowers me to seek hope of both self and community.

Beyond my personal experience, there is a sense that for rural places to thrive in a metro-centric world, they must root themselves in both their individual contextual realities and, as Jerry Johnson notes, the durable rural issues that all rural places often share.[4] In the midst of this analysis, there is a lack of theological and spiritual work rooted in the rural realities of the twenty-first century even though the rural experience is often grounded in faith. My goal with this paper is to begin exploring the value of the Wesleyan concept of sanctification for not just persons, but for place, particularly rural place. For this paper, I define place as the expression found in the intersection of culture, heritage, and geography as defined by the people who exist within that intersection. Sanctification is, if expanded, the idea that humanity and creation are not finished. It is in this unfinishedness that we can find a sense of creative hope. In fact, it is my belief that his hope continues to bubble up in rural places. I name this bubbling up as an irruptive prevenient grace drawing attention to the potential for a deepening understanding of both the place and future in rural life.

In this paper, I explore the potential an expanded understanding of Wesleyan sanctification holds for rural life, that moves beyond language of despair and flourishing, into a language renewal and deliverance. I begin with an experience of rural realities grounded in both

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[4] Jerry Johnson, "Durable Issues in Rural Education" in *Dynamics of Social Class, Race, and Place in Rural Education,* Eds. Craig B. Howley, Aimee Howley, and Jerry D. Johnson (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2014) 325-349.

rural ministry and rural studies. I ground my work in the lyrics of country singer Emily Scott Robinson's song "Men and Moons," whose lyrics serve as the epigraph of this paper. Around these central lyrics, I work with rural scholars, Wesleyan theologians, poststructuralist thinkers, and other sources to build a framework of rural sanctification as one of power, creativity, and relaunching toward God's Kingdom. I then provide examples and hindrances from a practical and contextual perspective in order to ground these ideas in rural realities.

Rural Explorations

Rural and rural community are terms that are quite regularly defined by what it is not or by what it lacks. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), a key United often prefers the term nonmetropolitan or nonmetro to define rural.[5] Or, as Jonathan Davis names the reality in his work, *Sea Change: Equipping Rural Churches for the Tides of Cultural Upheaval, "*Rural, in almost all statistical systems, is treated as residual, what is left over after urban areas have been defined."[6] Moreover, film and media often depict rural spaces as separate or othered spaces, be that horror films which view rural spaces as forgotten, dangerous, and predatory or Hallmark style films with idyllic landscapes and static towns with little to no change or problems.[7]

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[5] "Rural Classifications: Overview," United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, last updated March 26, 2024, accessed July 22, 2024, https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/

[6] Jonathan Davis, *Sea Change: Equipping Rural Churches for the Tides of Cultural Upheaval* (Warrenton Virginia: Freiling Publishing, 2021) 14.

[7] One text I find helpful is the David Bell's chapter "Anti Idyll: Rural Horror" in the edited text, *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalization, and Rurality.* Eds. Paul Cloke and Jo Little, (New York: Routledge, 1997) 94-109.

In my experience and research, rural people regularly absorb these images and understandings. They can often feel them even more deeply when it hits home. When a manufacturing plant closes in a rural community, people hold a sense of abandonment. As Timothy Minchin notes, people cannot even envision a future beyond the plant, '"Unable to break habits of a lifetime, some continued to rise at five in the morning, ready to start the first shift in the mill. As laid off worker Bessie Littlejohn explains, "You walk to the door, you stand in the door with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, and you ask yourself, 'Where do I go from here?' But no answer comes.""'[8] The sense of lost future also leads to a disrupted sense of worth. As May and Morrison observe in their qualitative study of a plant closure, "A company's decision to leave such a community, then, conveys a dual message: 'We neither need your help nor want it.'"[9] People who experience closures internalize the idea of lack of worth. They not only attach this lack of worth it to their understanding of employment, of but also of their rural ways of live, such as, May and Morrison explore, cooperation and collaboration to overcome hard times.[10] Beyond manufacturing, we can see these internalized understandings of self when schools close, farms are sold, local institutions shutter, or dramatic population shifts occur. And this despair can be exacerbated by substance abuse issues including alcohol, opioids, and other drugs.

While despair is often the image we receive of rural communities, I mention earlier the Hallmark idyllic imagery that other rural spaces may portray. I think of small mountain or coastal

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[8] Timothy Minchin, *Fighting Against the Odds: A History of Southern Labor Since World War II*, (Jacksonville, FL: University of Florida Press)163.

[9] Steve May and Laura Morrison, "Making Sense of Restructuring: Narratives of Accommodation among Downsized Workers," in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meaning of Industrialization,* eds. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press: 2003) 278.

[10] Ibid.

towns that seem to thrive on tourism or cultural amenities. Writers like Wendell Berry and shows like *The Andy Griffith Show,* further these rural ideals of vital and vibrant towns outside of the metro-centric world. But as my colleague, Allen Stanton notes, Wendell Berry's work is aspirational and idealized, and offers ideas for adoption in the actual world.[11] Moreover, for as delightful a show as it is, offers utopic ideals without dealing without dealing with the complex realities of working-class, rural, and ethnic issues presenting, as Alderman, Moreau, and Benjamin suggest, both an idyllic utopia and dystopia at the same time with no real solutions outside of 30 minute problems.[12] When people (both within and outside rural spaces) idealize rural spaces, we also crystalize them as if they do not or cannot change. And as Stanton asserts, "Rural communities deserve better than romantic images."[13]

In order to look toward hope and renewal in these places, rural spaces cannot simply absorb external understandings of rural community as declining or idyllic. Instead, they search for the value and hope within. They can dig into better descriptions of rural and place that lift both nuances and commonalities that allows them to find the grace necessary for sanctification. One way to begin exploring beauty and depth of rural spaces is to begin with identifying some particular types or expressions of rural place. While these are rooted in geographic descriptors, mountains, forests, deserts, plains, etc., it might be better to explore more socio-cultural realities, as place is not just about geography.

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[11] Allen T. Stanton,. *Reclaiming Rural: Building Thriving Rural Congregations,* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021) 7.

[12] Derek H. Alderman, Terri Moreau, and Stefanie Benjamin, "*The Andy Griffith Show:* Mayberry as Working-Class Utopia," in Blue-Collar Pop Culture: From NASCAR to Jersey Shore, (Vol. 2) Television and the Culture of Everyday Life, Ed M. Keith Booker (Denver, CO: Praeger, 2012) 54-63.

[13] Stanton, 9.

In *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change,* Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer offer one typology for rural communities with four main categories.[14] They list out Rapid Growth Exurban communities, Persistent Poverty Communities, Amenity-based communities, and Rural and Remote Communities. Exurban, being rural spaces on the edge or rapidly expanding urban areas, seeing increased population and infrastructure demands, along with the cultural shifts of that come with those changes. Persistent poverty communities are places experiencing generational poverty due to a multitude of factors. The best examples of this are Appalachian mining communities, Mississippi Delta Black Belt Communities, and Southwestern Native American communities. These all have distinct cultures but share the persistent poverty experience. Amenity based can be resource amenity such a mine or oil/gas field or recreational/natural amenity such as lake, beach, or ski resort. Finally, rural remote are places at that are not within a proximity to an urban center. Close, is of course, subjective. Remote in some spaces may be an one to two hours to an urban center, other places it may be five or six hours.

Within their explorations, the writers engage the unique realities, challenges and opportunities within each of those communities. The writers also note that these are not discreet communities but can overlap or blend together in many places. Exurban communities may also experience amenity-based realities, and persistent poverty communities may easily be very remote. These descriptors are here to provide some idea of the realities of rural places without direct comparison with urban/metro places. But, within these nuances, scholars have worked to identify rural commonalities including values, issues they face. Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer list out forms of capital or resources rural spaces have available to them and how they might use them to

[14] Cornelia Butler Flora, Jan L., and Stephen P. Gasteyer, *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change,* Fourth Edition. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2016) 20-25.

create and expand potential in rural spaces.[15] They are intentional about expanding the idea of capital beyond goods, people, and financial resources, to cultural and social ideas of capital as well. And while, yes, rural and urban communities have forms of capital, they work to point out distinctively rural forms of political capital, natural capital, and other forms.

Beyond Flora, Flora, Gasteyer work, Michael Corbett, who I mention earlier, lists out rural virtues that are unique in origin and expression. They are stewardship, deep place sensitive knowledge, and making do as one sees fit on known land and sea.[16] These make take on different expressions in different rural settings, but appear to exist universally, even if they might be hidden or stagnant virtues in the present reality. Alongside these virtues, Jerry Johnson lays, who I also reference earlier, lays out his understanding of durable issues in rural education, as he is primarily an education scholar.[17] However, I believe these issues, with nuance, can be expanded to rural communities. My modified version of his durable issues includes population changes, demographic changes, community viability (perceived and actual), social norms and disruptions, and issues of history and geography.

Exploring these issues, rural communities in the current time are facing shifts in population and demographics. Some rural communities may experience decline in numbers and an increase in the average age but see an increase in non-white residents due to migrant farm work or low-income manufacturing jobs. Other communities may face an increase in numbers as exurban or amenity-based communities thrive that also increases both poverty and higher income experiences as well. Beyond population shift, we see cultural realities shifting and changing.

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[15] Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer, 33-295.

[16] Corbett, Ibid.

[17] Johnson, Ibid.

This includes the viability of a community as perceived and actual. People often perceive the viability of a community based a number of changes, including their personal experiences, the loss of tradition, new corporations and institutions, and the shifts in cultural norms. Some may be actual changes, but some may be perceived changes. Michael Walden notes that often, people will say "there are no jobs here," when in fact, it is just not the traditional manufacturing, resource extraction and refining, or agricultural industries to which rural folks are accustomed.[18] Moreover, we see complaints about loss of community due to social and cultural disruptions. Johnson explains that communities have their norms they often expect of the next generation, and each generation and any newcomers to the community must choose to reproduce those cultural realties or to disrupt and interrupt them. This may be through women working outside of the home, the opening of multiple ethnic restaurants, or shifting from a perceived dominant Christian culture to one more secular or pluralistic. And within all of this, rural communities must look at how geography, history, and culture intersect to help them define what they experience as rural in their place and time.

Built On Bones

All communities must grapple with the realities and intersections of culture, place, and history to determine what it means for them to exist in place. However, rural communities, as we note, earlier, are often people who lift as a virtue, the ability to make do on known land and sea through their deep place sensitive knowledge and sense of stewardships. And while many suggest that rural people should simply leave their homes, place, and culture to seek and, as Johnson notes, consume metropolitan careers lifestyle, there is a quite often a feeling of, as the

[18] Michael C. Walden, *North Carolina in the Connected Age: Challenges and Opportunities in a Globalizing Economy,* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) 42-89.

title of this paper suggests, being bound to place by culture and heritage.[19] This sense of connection to place is often best depicted in music, particularly, country music. Tex Sample, in his text, *White Soul: Country Music, The Church, and Working Americans* notes that white working class and rural folk look to country music, not just to see their favorite artist, but to see themselves in the work.[20] Country music is raw, depicts imperfect lives, but also lifts up this imperfection, non-standard, non-urban life as acceptable and even beautiful.

One singer I find quite moving is Emily Scott Robinson. Robinson writes and performs music rooted in place, story, and experience. In 2022, Robinson recorded *Built on Bones,* an LP for songs she originally wrote for a production of the William Shakespeare tragedy, *Macbeth.* The songs are all form the perspective of the witches present throughout the tragedy. The opening track, "Built on Bones" sets up the almost fatalistic trajectory the story takes from the beginning.[21] This is something rural people can find themselves trapped in or have projected upon them. However, Robinson was not happy with the play ending in complete tragedy. When I attended her show in April 2023, she explained that these people would have to live in this place and deal with what happened, so she penned an epilogue song in which all the women characters join the witches to offer a prayer of hope in a land they call dear.[22] The stanza, which serves as

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[19] Johnson, 326-327.

[20] Tex Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church, and Working Americans,* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN: 1996), 71.

[21] Emily Scott Robinson, featuring Lizzy Ross and Alisa Amador. 2022. "Built on Bones" Recorded May 2022 on *Built on Bones.* Oh Boy! Records. Vinyl Recording.

[22] Emily Scott Robinson featuring Alisa Amador and Violet Bell, Concert, April 2023, Neighborhood Theater, Charlotte, North Carolina, April 2023.

the title and epigraph of this paper, speaks to me most, offers a starting point for uncovering and cultivating rural hope:

Bless this land to which we're bound
By gravity of joyful sound
Feed the hearth and feed the herd
Hope must stand on every word.[23]

My experience is that most rural folks are not trapped by their places and towns, but instead, they are rooted in connection to community, geography, and history, even if it is complicated. The women singing the song know what has happened, in fact, Lady Macbeth and Lady MacDuff both die within the story. Yet, they sing of hope and blessing in the midst of this tragedy.

The prayer is one of expectancy and action, a call to continue to live life, to care for place, and to know that the story is not over. Liberative education scholar Paulo Freire, names hope, a belief that the human story is not finished, as crucial to what he names as humanization, or becoming fully human.[24] My belief is that this hope, and beyond that, the experience and practice of sanctification, which I explore in the next section, can exist beyond the individual humans into the community, particularly the rural community, because the places people create are not finished, just like the people who create them.

Sanctification and Rural Life

Sanctification is rooted in the belief that Christ can and will renew humanity and all creation through the power of grace. John Wesley understands humanity as sinful and fallen from

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[23] Robinson, Men and Moons.

[24] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Thirtieth Anniversary Edition, tr. Myra Bergman Ramos, (New York: Continuum, 2005, 91.

God's original intent of perfection.[25] Randy Maddox notes that Wesley understands this sinful nature or fallenness as a deprivation of humanity's relationship with God.[26] This lack of relationship means that distorts and disrupts human faculties, making humans unable to live into their true holiness or the divinely inspired of humanity.[27] In this disrupted state, all relationships suffer including, as Maddox names, their relationship with God, neighbor, creation and self.[28] With these relationships disrupted all of creation suffers. In his sermon "The General Deliverance," John Wesley names this reality that all of creation suffers because humanity no longer understands the true nature of its relationships with creation.[29] Moreover, beyond God's creation, Wesley seems to note that human creations, including community struggles because of humanity's broken nature. In the sermon "On Visiting the Sick," he notes the failure of the rich (and, in reality, most people) to truly care for the sick, poor, and oppressed out of a desire for self-preservation, maintaining reputation, and self-inflicted ignorance.[30]

Amid these broken relationships, John Wesley offers hope in the form of God's grace. John Welsey roots his understanding of sanctification in the understanding that humanity is incomplete or unfinished. Humanity is asleep in sin and death.[31] The Spirit rouses the sleeping

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[25] This appears in several sermons and writings, but I find Sermon 3: "Awake Thou that Sleepest" most evocative. *The Works of John Wesley,* (from here on out, labeled as *Works),* 35 volumes planned(Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984-) 1:142-158.

[26] Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology.* Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994) 81.

[27] Sermon 3: 'Awake Thou that Sleepest' §I.11. *Works* 1:146.

[28] Maddox, 68.

[29] Sermon 60: The General Deliverance, §II.1. *Works* 2:442.

[30] Sermon 98: On Visiting the Sick, §I.3 *Works* 3:386.

[31] Sermon 3: 'Awake Thou that Sleepest' §I.11. *Works* 1:142.

through the grace of God, enacted in the salvific work of Jesus Christ.[32] John Wesley defines grace in his *Instructions for Children as* the power of the Holy Spirit enabling humanity to believe, love, and serve God.[33] The justifying work of Christ begins the renewal of humanity in God's image, and through that the renewal or sanctifying of humanities relationships.[34]

What I find powerful with Wesley's understanding of grace is that sanctification, the process of restoring humans in the image of God is a process of restoring and renewing relationships, not individuals. In fact, Theodore Runyon notes that the metaphor of a mirror for the image of God is used in both eastern theology and within John Wesley's understanding of this image, rooting it not in a static expression, but something innately relational, as a mirror is always reflecting somewhere. This that the mirror can and should reflect God's grace and love back to God and those directions to which God calls us to reflect.[35] However, due to sin, it is unable to reflect grace and love. However, humanity's unfinishedness offers the potential for the renewal of all things and sets in place the potential for hope. This hope is one that has a trajectory toward God's reign. This is not to say that humanity does not have presently have hope, however, due to the disrupted nature of humanity, their hope is also distorted. John and his brother Charles Wesley were both familiar with the work of Ephrem the Syrian, who, is part of the Eastern tradition from which they draw their understanding of disrupted relationships due to sin. Ephrem, in his *Hymns on the Nativity* suggests that instead of a destroyed or complete lack

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[32] Ibid.

[33] John Wesley, *Instructions for Children*, (London, 1787) 10, accessed July 22, 2024, https://archive.org/details/bim_eighteenth-century_instructions-for-childre_wesley-john_1787/mode/2up

[34] Sermon 3: 'Awake Thou that Sleepest' §III.1 *Works* 1:152.

[35] Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998) 13.

of hope, humanity's hope is actually shattered due to sin.[36] We can see this hope as the mirror Runyon, shattered, but still present. Thus, they still have hope, but they cannot direct it in the relational ways God intends. Instead, hope might be directed in all sorts of ways. Some of these ways may be ones of greed, lust, and anger. Other ways may be escapism, self-preservation, or fear. Finally, others may simply be hope that wants something new, more, or different, but does not know what that might be. Thankfully, as Charles Wesley writes in his Advent hymn, "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus," Christ is the "hope of all the earth."[37] Through sanctification, hope has a direction and purpose when humans direct it toward Christ.

The power of grace to enable humanity to direct its hope toward Christ is rooted in the nature of Christ and the Image of God. And, at the core of this image, as Charles Wesley names, "Thy nature and Thy name is love."[38] Furthermore, as John Wesley notes, the true core of the image of God, and thus the likeness God created humanity, is a moral love. Wesley writes: "'God is love:' Accordingly, man at his creation was full of love; which was the sole principle of all his tempers, thoughts, words, and actions. God is full of justice, mercy, and truth; so was man as he came from the hands of his Creator. Love, of course defined in terms of a divine love which proceeds from God."[39]

Grace intends, according to the Wesleys, not simply for us to not simply experience the love of God, but to participate in God's love and God's divine nature. In *A Plain Account of*

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[36] Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on the Nativity, No. 23:6 in *Hymns,* tr. Kathleen McVey, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). 188

[37] Charles Wesley, Hymn X, "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus" in *Hymns on the Nativity of Our Lord* (London: Strahan, 17450 14.

[38] Charles Wesley, "Wresting Jacob" in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London, Strahan 1742) 114-15.

[39] Sermon 45: The New Birth §I.1 *Works* 2:188-189.

Christian Perfection, John Wesley explains that Christian perfection, which a person can experience in this life, is a transformation and participation in love.[40] Moreover, S T Kimbrough notes that this transformation, or deification (being remade into God's image) is not simply an inward personal experience but has outward visibility.[41] Kimbrough quotes one of Charles Wesley's hymns in which the verse calls for love to not simply be inward, but lived out in life:

> 15.Thy gracious readiness
> To save mankind assert,
> Thine image, love, thy name impress,
> Thy nature on my heart.
> Bowels of mercy, hear,
> Into my soul come down,
> Let it throughout my life appear
> That I have Christ put on.[42]

This outward expression, of course comes in the loving of God and neighbor, as Wesley suggests multiple places, but can take on many forms.[43] He identifies these forms of love of God and neighbor as "means of grace."[44] He identifies certain means of grace as works of piety, or growing in love of God and others as works of piety, or growth in love of neighbor (and creation).[45] While both are important, John Wesley notes that works of mercy, or love of neighbor should take priority and be done with zeal.[46] These works of mercy look like feeding

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[40] John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,* §17. *Works* 13:159.

[41] S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., *Partakers of the Life Divine: Participation in the Divine Nature in the Writings of Charles Wesley* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016) 95.

[42] Charles Wesley, Hymn XVI in *Hymns of God's Everlasting Love* (London: Strahan, 1742) 50.

[43] John Wesley, *A Plain Account,* Ibid.

[44] Sermon 16: Means of Grace, §II.1, *Works: 1:381.*

[45] Sermon 92: On Zeal §II.5, *Works:* 3:313.

[46] Ibid. II.9, *Works* 3:314.

the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and in prison, and other works of mission and justice.[47] These means of grace work humanity toward sanctification by renewing relationships grounded in the image of God, but they also renew life beyond individuals and offer the potential for witness, hope, and grace with others.

Beyond zeal toward means of grace, John Wesley reminds that they are but means toward something greater, which he names as holy tempers in his sermon "On Zeal":

> But as zealous as we are for all good works, we should still be more zealous for holy tempers; for planting and promoting, both in our own souls, and in all we have any intercourse with, lowliness of mind, meekness, gentleness, longsuffering, contentedness, resignation unto the will of God… But our choicest zeal should be reserved for love itself - the end of the commandment, the fulfilling of the law. The church, the ordinances, outward works of every kind, yea, all other holy tempers, are inferior to this, and rise in value only as they approach nearer and nearer to it. Here then is the great object of Christian zeal.[48]

He then goes on to define those tempers in the I the rest of the sermon, and while one might easily suggest these tempers as internal spiritual matters, Wesley asserts that these Holy tempers are, as Wesley notes in the previous quote, not simply for individual souls, but for "any and all we have intercourse with."[49] The means of grace and holy tempers are designed not simply to renew our image, but to expand the grace of God into the world. And, as I mention earlier, "The General Deliverance," he further expands the idea of grace beyond even humanity to all of brute creation, noting that because of humanity's failure and sin, that creation is cut off from the love of God and is thus no longer in the state God intends for them.[50] Beyond even living creatures, I

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid. II.10-11, *Works* 3:314-315.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Sermon 60: The General Deliverance §II.1-2. *Works 2:442.*

believe Wesley understands this renewal which begins in salvation and sanctification to spread into place, community, and beyond.

Means of Grace for Rural Hope

Wesley's understanding of means of grace and holy tempers alongside the notion of the general deliverance and the renewal of all creation offers up the creative potential which rural communities can harness for building a future for their communities grounded in a sense of love for God, neighbor, and place. Yet, it often feels like the means of grace are limited to those that are, as Wesley suggested, "ordered by God" (as Wesley describes the Instituted Means of Grace).[51] The church and Christians, particularly in rural communities often act as if they are bound to the traditions and designated Christian practices. That is, the church acts as if its role is crystalized in a particular way.

This has been my experience in the rural church. I served as Christian Education Director for a (then) United Methodist congregation in Thomasville, North Carolina as the historic Thomasville Furniture Plants were in the process of closing their doors.[52] Of course hundreds of jobs were eliminated, but beyond that, identity and sense of self began to deteriorate. As the sources I cite earlier indicate, the loss of industry and tradition often leads to loss of identity and even connection to place. People in the community were experiencing mental health crises, even to the point of a church member being arrested and put on a psychological hold. When I approached the senior pastor at the time, he chose not to visit the church member or his family.

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[51] John Wesley, Letter to Mrs Pendarves, July 19, 1731, *Works* 25:293-294.

[52] Winston-Salem Journal, "Thomasville Furniture Plants to Close by March 21," 2014, Article. January 21, 2014. Accessed July 22, 2024, https://myfox8.com/news/thomasville-furniture-plants-to-close-by-march-21/

When I asked him what we could to help the people of the community beyond the food pantry and emergency funds, he simply said, “It’s not our job to help them.” He did not plan to do more than the church had historically done for the community, which consisted of prayer, food drives, and donations to the local crisis and ministry centers.

It seems as if, in the face of a crisis or cultural change, the rural churches feel restricted to their traditional roles. Yet, John Wesley advocates for the creation of new means of grace, which he names prudential means of grace. Unique from the instituted means of grace, these arise from, as Wesley notes in his 1731 letter to Aspasia, “reason and experience.”[53] He goes on to essentially say that anything may help ward of sin and evil or further the holy tempers and holiness of the creation may become means of grace as so long as they serve to renew humanity and creation.[54]

This discerning of new means of grace requires a willingness to creatively engage both the divine and the community with the assumption, like Wesley, that things are unfinished and that the Holy Spirit empowers people toward a renewal and reviving of self, neighbor, and creation. It is with this statement that I begin to offer ideas for a rural means of grace that seeks out the latent hope in rural spaces and relaunches in Spirit of love and renewal to renew both hearts and places.

I say latent hope because I believe that rural communities still hold the potential for hope, regardless of their present state. This hope manifests in ways that rural folks can harness and creatively engage toward new life. I believe this latent hope is, in many ways, a form of grace. In

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[53] John Wesley Letter to Mrs Pendarves, Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

fact, I want to label it as a form of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace, for John Wesley, comes prior to the act of justification in Christ. He writes:

> Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God.[55]

This language around grace is very individual human focused, however, I want to argue, that an ability to see this hope and want to work with it, is a form of prevenient grace found within the spirit of place, particularly rural communities. As Wesley notes in the quote above, "All these imply some tendency toward life…"[56] This tendency toward life can and should be both individual and communal, and to identify this hope is a sign that the grace is moving within rural places.

I believe this ability to identify hope, is a sign of what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire names, "humanization" or the process of becoming more fully human.[57] This process is one of being able to name and change the world, overcoming oppressive forces in this work. This humanization process feels very much like John Wesley's notion of sanctification or renewal of humanity toward its true vocation. For Freire, to be able to name the world requires dialogue, and this dialogue requires community and communication rooted in a trust, love, and hope that humanity is not finished and can act toward new life.[58]

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[55] Sermon 85: On Working out our Own Salvation, §II.1, *Works:* 3:203-204.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Freire, Chapter 1, 43-70.

[58] Freire, Chapters 2 and 3, 71-124.

This hope rural people can name is not simply spiritual or ethereal but is rooted in the same virtues I highlight above. Particularly I want to highlight a deep place sensitive knowledge and the ability to make do as necessary in a known place. The hope, as I see it, manifests in already present practices, traditions, and experiences in rural communities. In the next section I identify two potential sources of hope and the opportunities they hold when claimed by rural communities.

Christmas Lights and Covered Dish Meals

My experience with rural hope comes in many forms, but the two I want to examine are outdoor Christmas lights and covered dish meals. Both are traditions, one of the rural community and one of the rural church. And for me, both feel as if they are prudential means of grace that root themselves in church and rural traditions. This intersection of traditions offers a richer place to dig into the potential for communal transformation. Yolanda Smith's work in reclaiming of intersecting heritages or the identifying of places where multiple traditions and experience come together, identifies opportunities for transforming communities by renewing tradition. Her work is with the spirituals and the triple heritage they can offer the African American community. She roots the spirituals in Christian, African, and African American heritage, and sees them as a means of strengthening the black church and community.[59] I find this methodology extremely helpful for rural spaces, as so much of rural life is a blending of geography, culture, heritage, and faith. Identifying these spaces of intersection allows for the naming of these experiences as means of grace and signs of latent hope.

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[59] Yolanda Smith, *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004) 1-20.

The first instance of latent hope, or perhaps communal prevenient grace, is outdoor Christmas lights. While we know the use of artificial light in the long nights winter months is historically common both culturally and in many religions to represent the presence of light in the darkness, Christmas lights on rural roads offers a unique experience.[60] I have come to understand them as a sign of hope, of course, but almost a prayer for the passersby and the community. Even in rural places experiencing decline or even despair, rural folks decorate their homes for the Christmas and winter holidays. And being that outdoor lights are mostly seen by those driving past the homes and businesses, not those who live and work there, I see them as expressions of hope and prayer for a community going through life together. These prayers with no subjects offer reminders that people are willing to do the work to display hope and love in their places despite the costs (work and electric bills). These prayers are means of grace that, as Wesley suggests, spreads holy tempers through the work of the Spirit, not simply into other persons but out into the community with no particular person in sight, offering a general hope or deliverance to whomever or whatever will receive it.

The second instant of latent hope are the covered dish meals in rural churches. These meals, sometimes called potlucks, dinner on the grounds, or other regional names, are often held right after church. Yes, in many places the attendance of these meals have waned, they still regularly draw people in to share a meal together. These meals, although usually full of a mix of homemade and storebought food, are not primarily about the eating, but the gathering of people. The food, however, becomes a catalyzer of memory and opportunity. Giorgio Agamben in his piece, "The Hunger of an Ox" explores the idea of sabbath and the sabbath feast, as not one of

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[60] Robert Webber, *Ancient Future Time: Forming Spirituality Through the Christian Faith.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004) 58-60.

needing to actually feed physical hunger.[61] For most everyone at the church supper, it would be easier to go home or to a restaurant to prepare their meals. Instead, this meal is about coming together without expectation of work and celebrating community. However, the particular dishes often evoke memories of heritage as well as hopes for the future. Whether it's Selma's coconut cake, Ruby's yeast rolls, or Kenny's pimento cheese sandwiches, people recall those who have gone on before. And then, there are the new dishes. The vanilla wafer pound cake the preacher brought or the new kind of casserole the choir director made offer new flavors and experiences. In the end though, the conversations, ideas, memories, and opportunities shared in these spaces are what offer the latent hope I see as opportunity for renewal, because the meals always offer both memories and opportunities which, if engaged, become spaces for grace to take hold.

With these two examples, I want to offer ideas for rural renewal through engaging these expressions of hope. I turn to philosopher Jacques Derrida who speaks to this reality of heritage, which I will expand to include culture and geography, in the form of place. [62] Derrida explores the reality that heritage is without choice. However, the choice they do have is how to engage and even relaunch it. Persons can passively receive and carry on heritage, or they can choose to creatively and hopefully engage it. Derrida suggests that it be engaged with love and relaunched in ways that promote a future of love. This relaunching requires the naming and engaging of the heritage (and place) in ways that identify both opportunities and hindrances. Honest conversations, a willingness to sort through the pain and grief, and an acknowledgement of both incompletion and imperfection allow for this relaunching with hope.

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[61] Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities,* tr. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011) 110-111.

[62] Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow…:A Dialogue,* tr. Jeff Fort (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004) 3-5.

With both examples I offer, they root themselves in place and engage a some form of latent. Christmas lights remind us that people have enough hope in them to offer light, joy, and even prayer for their community. This desire to use seasonal lights for the purposes of hope, joy, offer a particular Christian opportunity. Psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva notes that the power of Christian community is that it has the opportunity to transform suffering into joy.[63] She cites resurrection, community, and the call of Christ to alleviate suffering. Within this frame, the Christmas lights become a means of grace that can be expanded within the greater community. Rural communities can examine their desire to offer joy through both prayer and action. As I note earlier, "making do" is a key rural virtue, and this illuminating means of grace can transform making do into creatively thriving in rural spaces. A desire to pray, to connect, and spread joy can expand into reaching out through mission, art, and creative work such as a church offering a communal art wall during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, a church not simply feeding the hungry, but fostering community and relationships with those in need, or doing the creation of a prayer ministry that offers not only prayer but connection with resources and people who may be able to offer support.

As for the covered dish meals, these celebrations of feast offer opportunity to connect over a meal that fosters stories, connections, and creative expressions of ordinary food. As a means of grace, this goes beyond feeding for the sake of nourishment to the strengthening of the community through recalling history and hoping toward a future where these meals continue and grow. These meals and the meaning beyond them remind us that food ministries, church spaghetti and barbecue (pulled pork) fundraisers, and even these meals hold potential for creative

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[63] Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe,* tr. Beverly Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia Uinversity Press, 2009) 84, 90-91.

hope in rural spaces. One example is a church that held regularly meal fundraisers for mission and ministry. They had a barbecue fundraiser in the spring and a chicken pie fundraiser in the fall. These fundraisers were regularly attended by hundreds in the community. As the church discerned next steps, the church intentionally had folks who were not cooking, cleaning, or selling, to be present at the meal as conversation partners. They were there simply to meet people, hear their stories, and to bring their experiences back to discern the needs of the community. They rooted this in John Wesley idea of visiting the sick.[64] This work of fostering relationships meant they were able to better know the needs of the community and begin to offer a better ministry response to the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of the church. One thing that emerged was a respite program for grandparents and great grandparents raising grandchildren. Volunteers create vacation bible school like activities for kids to come twice a month for four hours, while the caretakers can simply do things they cannot do with kids.

Changed from Glory into Glory

These examples are reminders that rural people can create new realities for themselves and their community, especially when they are attuned to the laten hope present in their communities and can utilize their faith and the grace of God to live into the future they name and build together. One concern I continue to feel for rural communities is that of hauntedness. The idea that the futures they were once promised have been lost. This notion also comes from Derrida, and is a reminder nostalgia, fear, anxiety, and grief can become tormenters of individuals and communities.[65] Hauntedness can become a paralytic when it prevents moving

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[64] Sermon 98: On Visiting the Sick, §II:1-6, *Works* 3:389-392.

[65] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International,* tr. By Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). 9-18, 48.

forward for fear of losing the past. It can become a defense mechanism when it is used to defend itself against external judgments or expectations. We see this is my horror and Mayberry references above. This hauntedness unintentionally becomes a hindrance to the spirit of creative. And this brings us back to John Wesley, particularly in the desire to disrupt unholy tempers. Hisletter to Mrs. Pendarves, which I reference earlier, calls for the avoiding of things which do not aid or may hinder sanctification and deliverance: "Whatever hinders the extirpating my vile affections or the transferring my rational ones to proper objects, that to me is not indifferent, but resolutely to be abstained from, however familiar and pleasing"[66]

The reality is, though, this is a complex reality. Communities should utilize trauma and mental health training, grief counseling, and creative expression as prudential means of grace, knowing that these resources can be transformative. One reality is that those doing the work, particularly churches, are made up of the people in the community. This was the struggle the church in Thomasville faced. They were paralyzed in the wake of deindustrialization because it was happening to them. The clergy and laity were not trained in grief, trauma, or creative and liberative discipleship. There is a need for resources for rural places created by rural places to disrupt despair, to process grief, and construct futures beyond their current experience without a haunted desire to return to "the way things were."

The Wesleyan tradition of accountability, discipleship, and sanctification hold great potential for this work, and my hope is that this paper furthers that conversation. One way I see this happening is naming the reality of our incompleteness. The lyric in Charles Wesley's hymn "Love Divine All Loves Excelling" reminds us that we are always in the process of being

[66] John Wesley, Letter to Mrs Pendarves, Ibid.

"changed from glory into glory" or transformed in love over and over.[67] Furthermore, John Wesley even suggests in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,* that in perfection and even in God's Kingdom, we will continue to grow.[68] This idea of continual changes fits well with the idea of seasonality in rural communities. Places go through natural seasons, be they annual seasons or the seasons of life. The reminder here is that seasons are consistently changing. However, in this change, communities are not expected to forget about the past seasons, past experiences, and memories. But as they work to imagine and build new seasons, they cannot become beholden to previous seasons. This work of relaunching place becomes doubly important if it is to both utilize place for transformation and to remember the past seasons (good and bad) without being trapped by them.

The work of sanctification and deliverance of individuals and communities, the call to bless the land—to bless the place—is rooted in a belief that the story is not finished. The power of grace can inspire people to engage the hope that is bubbling, despite fear, judgment, despair, and grief that may try to overtake the faith and place rural communities. My prayer is that rural communities continue to create the new seasons for their places and people that honor their story and create new and faithful expressions of place grounded in love.

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[67] Charles Wesley, *Hymns for those that seek, and those that have Redemption in the Blood of Christ*. (London, Strahan, 1747) 11-12.

[68] John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,* §19. *Works* 13:175.

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