

A PARABLE

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Down by the river, Mr. Wesley discovered the whole village. Women, men, and children were gathered around the young circuit rider, who was standing on a tree stump, singing spiritual songs that came from African slaves. The circuit rider then opened a Bible and read a text other than that assigned by the lectionary.

Mr. Wesley was livid. The veins in his neck stood out. His face turned red. He pushed his way through the crowd up to the circuit rider. Even before the circuit rider could begin to preach, Mr. Wesley asked the young man if he knew who he was. The circuit rider replied, "Of course, Mr. Wesley, I would recognize your face anywhere." Then Mr. Wesley demanded an explanation. Why were the Methodists not in their meetinghouse, singing Charles's songs, following the lectionary, reading the liturgy, and celebrating the Lord's Supper? Mr. Wesley had written down exactly how Methodists were to worship in the new world. Singing African spirituals outdoors and reading alternative passages from Scripture was not worship!

The young circuit rider jumped off his stump and asked Mr. Wesley to sit down before he had a heart attack. It would not do for Mr. Wesley to die in the American wilderness. As Mr. Wesley sat, the circuit rider told him a story.

Once upon a time, a farmer was riding his horse-drawn wagon to market. Although he and his horse followed the same road every week, the farmer held the horse's reins tightly in his hands. When the road turned left, the farmer jerked hard on the reins pulling the horse's head to the left. When the road turned right, the farmer pulled the reins hard to the right, cutting the bit into the horse's mouth. Although the farmer and his horse always got to market, the horse was always exhausted and bleeding at the mouth.

One day, the farmer passed a traveler on the road. The sojourner saw how the farmer manipulated and abused the horse. The traveler cried out to the farmer: "Let go the reins." On a whim, the farmer let go of the reins. He

Soon after the creation of the United States of America, John Wesley made a secret journey to the new land. He wanted to see how well the circuit riders, guided by Francis Asbury, the new bishop, were sharing the gospel on the American frontier. Mr. Wesley landed in Wilmington, North Carolina, and made his way west. One Sunday, Mr. Wesley came to a small settlement near the Yadkin River where he heard a young circuit rider had gathered a society of new believers.

When Mr. Wesley came into the village, he heard no sounds. All the houses were empty. Even the Methodist meetinghouse, the home of a lay leader, had no occupants. Mr. Wesley became worried. Had the people been seized and dragged from the town? Had a plague destroyed the village? He knew that on Sunday good Methodists would be in their meetinghouse singing Charles Wesley's hymns, following the lectionary, reading the liturgy of the Word, and celebrating the Lord's Supper using the *Sunday Service for the People Called Methodist* that he had adapted from the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1784. Where were all the Methodists?

Then, in the distance, Mr. Wesley heard some singing. He did not recognize the tune, but he followed the sound.

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believed that the horse would stop, become lost, and waste their time. How could the horse know what to do without the farmer's firm hand?

Then an amazing thing happened. The horse turned, looked at the farmer, and began to walk ahead slowly, staying precisely in the middle of the road. As the journey continued, the horse began to move more quickly, still never leaving the narrow path. By the time the horse and driver reached the town, the horse had begun to dance. They arrived in town more quickly than ever before. The horse was free and fresh. Letting go of the reins changed forever the relationship between the farmer and his horse, as well as their ability to accomplish their common task.

As he finished the story, the circuit rider replied, "Mr. Wesley, we love your *Sunday Service*, but it just won't work in this new world. Mr. Wesley, let go the reins."

Mr. Wesley returned to England, never again to return to the United States. And he wondered, until his dying day, what God and he had created.

In our worship, let go the reins. Let God and the people lead our worship. And when we all arrive together in God's new millennium, we will be freer and fresher and richer for the experience.

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