1/26-27/19 Rev. Amy Haines

Gal 5:13-25, Rm 12:9-18, 21 Do No Harm/Do Good Three Simple Rules

(combined due to weather)

Google “three simple rules” today, and you will be offered over 17 million results, many that have nothing whatsoever to do with living for Christ.

Threerules.org deals with finances:

Spend less than you earn, Save now buy later, Know debt

3simplerules.com that deals with decisions in business:

Tell people what you want them to do, Provide them feedback on how they are doing,

Use data to make decisions about the first two rules

I even found Michael Pollan’s three simple rules for eating:

Eat real food, Not too much, Mostly plants

While interesting, none of these have anything to do with the Christian faith. Instead, I invite you to reflect on the following three simple rules:

Do No Harm ... Do Good … Stay in Love with God

The late Bishop Rueben Job reintroduced these rules to the people called Methodists in 2007

when he wrote this little book [hold up] titled *“Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living.”*

The rules are based on the General Rules of the United Methodist Church given by John Wesley in 1739 to the first class meetings and still published today in our Book of Discipline.

We call them rules, yet they are more a way of living that is reflected throughout the scriptures, a way of living in relationship with God and with one another.

This way of living began with Deuteronomy 6, known as the *Shema*, a guiding principle for all of life. Our Israelite ancestors were told:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts

of your house and on your gates.” (Deut 6:4-9)

Love God with all your heart, soul, and might.

Unfortunately, the Israelite priests turned that one rule and the 10 Commandments into 613 laws, making it impossible for any one person to fully keep the law.

When Jesus came and taught about the kingdom of God, he was asked by the religious leaders what was the most important commandment. They tried to trap him, yet he returned to Deuteronomy.

Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12. 29-31)

Love God and love neighbor. Faith built on those two foundational relationships.

Unfortunately, the Christian Church took this foundation and once again made it complex, often with lists of rules and regulations.

So by the 1700s, when John Wesley was preaching and teaching in England, the new Christians known as Methodists were once again asking what they needed to *do* to follow Jesus. How do they remain faithful to Jesus, grow in grace, and “flee from the wrath to come”?

John Wesley’s response was the three General Rules:

Do No Harm ... Do Good … Attend to the Ordinances of God

These General Rules were given to the Methodist Christians as they met in small groups called class meetings, given as a way of living that offered tangible evidence of their growing faith.

Even as the class meetings slowly died off in the Methodist church, the General Rules remained a part of our Book of Discipline, complete with often archaic examples of what Wesley meant by each rule.

Then, in 2007, the late Bishop Rueben Job reintroduced the rules to our modern society.

I agree with Bishop Job when he proclaims: “The three simple rules in themselves are contemporary and exceptionally well suited to our time, our culture, and our needs today.” (TSR p.17)

They are still a timeless way for us to love God and love neighbor.

Do No Harm … Do Good … Stay in Love with God

When Job wrote his book in 2007, he talked about faithful living in divided times. Since then, we have experienced the stock market downturn of 2008, three presidential elections, more school shootings, and deeper entrenchment into our own tribal camps in politics and in the church.

We enter a new year with old divisions. We enter a new year with continual struggles. Yet can we also enter a new year asking how can we live fully for Christ in the year 2019?

Consider Paul’s word to the Galatian Christians, a word also for us today.

He reminds us we can be influenced by the culture around us, living by the flesh, living for ourselves, or we can be influenced by the Holy Spirit, evidenced by the fruits of the Spirit in our lives, living a new life in Christ.

We may glance over Paul’s list of desires of the flesh and think to ourselves, well, most of that list doesn’t apply to me. I live a basically good life. I try to live by love and kindness and generosity. I am not impure or immoral. I am not involved with sorcery or idolatry.

Yet how many of us will confess to quarrels or jealousy, anger or dissensions, envy or drunkenness?

There is a reason John Wesley began with “Do no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced.” (BOD 2016 p.78)

We cannot be in relationship with God and with others if we are first doing harm to them, either through what we do or what we don’t do. So rule #1 is Do No Harm.

None of us wake up on any given morning and say to ourselves, today I am going to give in to evil and harm anyone who crosses my path on this day. That is usually not the way we think, is it? If it is, then we need some serious psychological and divine help.

Do No Harm is a way of living that not only invites us to refrain from doing something we didn’t plan to do in the first place, it also invites us to actively consider our words and actions and even our silence as we live in relationships with others.

We may not strive to live by the desires of the flesh, but how many nights must we confess the ways we have not lived by the fruits of the spirit?

How many nights must we confess the physical, mental or emotional harm we have done that day in our relationships with others, in our relationship with God, to our own selves, or even to God’s creation.

We constantly leave lights on around our homes or refuse to recycle what we can. We neglect to exercise or get enough sleep. We skip a daily devotional time for that new TV show. We yell at each other or physically fight with each other. We say things via social media we would never say face to face. We post on social media before verifying what is true or reflecting on if it is helpful. We gossip about others. We believe rumor as fact. We condemn those with whom we disagree, we refuse to listen to a truth other than the one we believe in, we seek to always be in control, we call even family members by unkind names.

Turn on the news on any given day and you will see many examples of how we harm one another instead of doing good.

Even in the church, how often do we harm each other in the name of Jesus. We share gossip disguised as prayer requests. We quit when we cannot control the direction of our groups or committees. We disparage one another, talking about or questioning each other behind their backs.

We refuse to listen to the Spirit speak through someone who does not agree with our specific theology. We say amen on Sunday mornings to God’s Word and then live any way we want to during the rest of the week.

Many of the evils John Wesley gave in the 1700s as examples of what to avoid in order to do no harm still apply to us today.

Avoid: Taking the name of God in vain, Drunkenness, Quarreling, Uncharitable conversation, Needless self-indulgence, Borrowing without a probability of paying

From what we say to how to we act to what we do, we are called to first and foremost

Do No Harm.

For as the apostle Paul proclaimed:

For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. (Galatians 5:14-15)

Can you imagine what life would look like if we all lived by this simple yet profound rule?

Imagine how our lives, our churches, even our societies would be transformed if we took seriously this rule to do no harm. We would truly live by the gifts of the Spirit rather than the desires of the flesh. We would be an example of grace not judgment, of hope not despair, of faithfulness not selfishness.

In the midst of conflict, imagine how the climate would change if we entered a room and knew the other person sought our best interest at heart, seeking not to harm us in any way. We would no longer be afraid of fist fights and mudslinging. It would mean an end to gossip, an end to speaking disparagingly about the other person, an end of hearing complaints via the grapevine. It would mean a stop to manipulating the facts to make my position seem strong and the other person’s position seem weak.

To live by a lifestyle of doing no harm would not only change the climate of our conflicts but also raise the trust level in our relationships. We would not be as hesitant to be vulnerable if we knew other people had our best interests at heart rather than their own interests as their agenda. Instead of diminishing the personhood of each other, we would honor one another as equal and beloved children of God.

What a witness we would give for Christ, if the first rule for all our relationships, all our interactions with others, was do no harm!

Yet, Bishop Job warns us, there are barriers to this rule becoming a way of living in our daily lives.

The first barrier is we do not trust God enough. We don’t trust that God’s justice is good enough. Instead, we want revenge. We don’t trust that God will empower and lead us away from harm and toward a deeper level of faith and understanding.

The second barrier is we are too loyal to our own ideologies or theologies rather than loyal only to Jesus Christ. This results in our rigidness that our way is the only way and Jesus does not speak through any other position than our own.

The third barrier is simply and profoundly fear. We are afraid of where God will lead us. We are afraid of what sacrifice God will require of us. We are afraid of the consequences following Jesus deeper into discipleship will require in our lives.

Bishop Job reminds us of these barriers, but also gives us hope. He declares,

“There are two enormously encouraging truths for us to remember as we embark on this way of living. One, God is with us. God continues to woo us, seek us out, love us, speak to us, enable us, and lead us into the future. Second, it has been done before.” (TSR Conversation p. 3)

As we seek to follow Jesus, we can learn to live by rule #1 Do No Harm. We can also learn to live by rule #2, Do Good.

Last year, this congregation compiled 50 flood buckets and donated almost $3000 to the work of UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief. Many of you will open your hearts and your wallets to help another in need.

Our human nature likes to help others, to be kind, to seek a common good. Yet, anyone can do good. What does it mean for us to Do Good as Christians?

Think back to the foundation of these three simple rules—the love of God and the love of neighbor. We are called to do good because Christ calls us to do so.

This call to do good is a universal command from Jesus. Listen to these words of Jesus from Luke 6:“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Lk 6. 27-28)

The apostle Paul reminds us that goodness is part of who we are when we live as authentic Christians. His words to the Romans were not simply a laundry list of how to live; rather they were evidence of an authentic life, free of hypocrisy.

Live by genuine love; mutual affection and honor; sharing in joys and sorrow; active care for the community. And “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (v21)

John Wesley called the Methodist Christians then and now to Do Good--“By being in every kind merciful after our power; as we have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all” (BOD 2016 p.79)

We are to do good to body and soul. We are to do good by being faithful to one another within the community of faith. We are to do good by being faithful to follow Christ.

This is how we love our neighbor, by following the first two of these three simple rules.

Do No Harm … Do Good

John Wesley wrote in his journal sometime between August 1738 and November 1739:

“There is scarce any possible way of doing good, for which here is not daily occasion…

Here are poor families to be relieved: Here are children to be educated: Here are workhouses, wherein both young and old gladly receive the word of exhortation: Here are prisons, and therein a complication of all human wants.” (TSR p. 35)

And consider this quote, attributed to John Wesley:

“Do all the good you can,

by all the means you can,

in all the ways you can,

in all the places you can,

at all the times you can,

to all the people you can,

for as long as ever you can.”

This universal command to do good is not limited to only those whom we like or only those who like us. This universal command to do good goes way beyond our friends and other believers to include even the strangers in our midst, those whom we dishonor as being below us, and any we would consider an enemy. This universal command of Jesus to do good extends to all. Stranger and friend. The rich and the poor. The lonely and the loved. The religious and the non-religious. The welcomed and the outcast. Those who love us and those who hate us. Those we have hurt and those who have hurt us.

We are called to do all the good we can to all the people we can in all the ways we can in all the places we can. That means at work, at home, in church, and in the community. That means with strangers at the mall, with other parents at the ball field, with co-workers, friends and neighbors, and even with those who are out to hurt us.

When we take seriously this call to do good to all people in all places, our natural human response often then becomes, Where do I stop? What will I have left? Am I really called to move beyond my carefully selected projects to a lifestyle of Christian living?

Bishop Job words these questions we all ask by saying:

“Tell me, where are the boundaries? Will the demands for my time, my influence, and my money become overwhelming? Even I can see that this could quickly get out of hand and, before I know it, my whole life is given away. I am not sure I am willing to live in such an uncontrolled situation.”

He then goes on to say: “Perhaps control is the dominant word here.” (TSR p.39)

These rules are simple to remember, yet challenging to live by.

Do No Harm … Do Good … Stay in Love with God

The main obstacle to living a lifestyle of doing good is our desire for control.

.. We want to control how the good we do is rationed. We want to control how the good we do is received. And we want to control how the good we do is used.

Our first obstacle to doing good is our desire to control how the good we do is rationed.

We know Jesus’ call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit those in prison. We see the great needs of our community around us. But we are afraid that once we begin to do good, we won’t be able to stop until all our resources are gone. Instead of living a lifestyle of goodness we figure out what is the minimum we can give and still maintain our comfortable and safe lives. Instead of generously following the words of Paul where he says: “Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality” we give a token gift or a token smile that is neither sacrificial nor genuine.

Our second obstacle to doing good is our desire to control how the good we do is received.

We are also afraid that when we do good to others they may receive it ungratefully or not really appreciate our gift. We are afraid that we will be taken advantage of or what we give will never make it to the one who is truly in need. We are challenged to live by the words of Paul when he says, “practice playing second fiddle; make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.” We seek to be rewarded when the response to our gift is really out of our control.

That leads us to our third obstacle to doing good, our desire to control how our good is used.

How many birthday gifts are given with expectations of responsible living or obligations in return? How many acts of goodness are misused or even abused, opposite of the way we want them to be used? Too often we do good to others not as gifts but as loans, expecting repayment, expecting thanks, expecting some sort of return for our investment.

(adapted from Dean Feldmeyer 5-18-08 wilmingtonumc.com)

Control is our greatest obstacle to a lifestyle of doing good. And the reality is, the only thing we can control is what we do, to whom, and how often. The only thing we can control is why we do good—to be a do-gooder, or to respond to the grace and love and goodness of God that we have received in our lives.

Bishop Job says:

“My desire to do good is in response to God’s invitation to follow Jesus, and it is in my control.

I can determine to extend hospitality and goodness to all I meet. I can decide to do good to all, even to those who disagree with me and turn against what I believe is right and good. And the reward for my doing good is not cancelled or diminished by the response to my acts of goodness. I will have the reward of knowing I did what was right and pleasing to God. I will still be identified, known, and loved as a child of God. What could be a greater reward than this?” (TSR p.40-41)

Friends, I have seen churches torn apart by those who refuse to do good to one another, let alone do good to their neighbors in the surrounding community. I have seen churches torn apart by harm done in the name of Jesus, relationships destroyed and forgiveness refused.

I have also seen churches transformed by the Holy Spirit when they intentionally live by these three simple rules. Because they are committed to staying in love with God, they recognize they must also stay in love with one another. So they chose to do no harm and do good.

It is not easy. But it becomes a powerful testimony to a divided world of grace and redemption and unity.

In this new year of 2019, may we live by this Wesleyan way of life that reflects Christ in our relationships with others.

Next weekend we will reflect on rule #3, Stay in Love with God, and celebrate Holy Communion together as we are reminded that our love for one another must be formed by God’s love for us and is part of our response to God’s love.

We cannot do good and do no harm to our neighbor or even ourselves without staying in love with God, balancing personal and social holiness balancing faith as belief and faith as action.

As you go through this week, living in the midst of your daily, ordinary lives, be mindful of the ways you can do no harm, be attentive to the ways you can do good, all in the name, nature and love of Christ our Lord.

May we be open to the Holy Spirit guiding us, opening our mouths when we need to speak up on behalf of others, closing our mouths when we need to refrain from disparaging another beloved child of God.

May we be open to the Holy Spirit guiding us, to care for body, mind and soul in tangible and practical ways of goodness and kindness.

May we be open to the Holy Spirit guiding us,

to “Do all the good we can,

by all the means we can,

in all the ways we can,

in all the places we can,

at all the times we can,

to all the people we can,

for as long as ever we can.”

May God give us the strength and guidance to make it so.

Let us pray.