2-2/3-19 Stay in Love with God Rev. Amy Haines

John 21.15-19 Three Simple Rules

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, there is a classic scene between the Jewish parents Tevye and Golde who have been married for twenty-five years. As their daughters seek to marry for love, a different approach to marriage than their parents, Tevye seeks assurance of Golde’s love for him.

Tevye asks, “Do you love me?”

And Golde replies “Do I what?”

“Do you love me?”

“Do I love you?” Golde responds. “For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow. After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?”

Tevye and Golde go on to sing about the first time they met on their wedding day, how they were scared and shy and nervous, yet full of hope that they would learn to love each other.

As Tevye persists with his question, Golde muses: “Do I love him? For twenty-five years I've lived with him/ Fought him, starved with him/Twenty-five years my bed is his /If that's not love, what is?”

The scene ends with both of them singing: “It may not change a thing But even so After twenty-five years It's nice to know.” (Ed Markquart, Do You Love Me? Sermonsfromseattle.com)

Years ago on a youth mission trip I was taught that love is a verb. Love is best shown in the way we live, not only in what we say. Love is evidenced in our relationships with others.

Throughout the Scriptures there is an underlying theme of love, a foundation of love for God and love for neighbor. Jesus summarized it best when asked, “Which commandment is the first of all?” And 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. 28-31)

Loving God and loving neighbor—these are the greatest commandments given to us by Jesus, the basis for the Wesleyan movement, and the basis for the late Bishop Job’s book *Three Simple Rules*.

If you remember the three simple rules from worship last week, say them with me now:

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

These 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*.

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

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

We call them rules, yet they are more a way of living in relationship with God and with one another.

Last week we reflected on the first two rules:

Do No Harm…Do Good

These two rules have to do with our love for one another. Do we see each other as beloved and valued children of God? Do we live in such a way, even in conflict, that we first and foremost seek to do no harm to one another, through our words, actions and even silence? Then once we have each other’s best interests at heart, do we do good to body and soul, to all the people by all the means in all the places we can?

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

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

If we try to do no harm and do good without staying in love with God, eventually the first two rules become daily chores that are impossible to achieve rather than a way of life following Jesus. For our love for others has to be grounded in our love for God. Staying in love with God is foundational for any authentic life of faith.

Yet how do we stay in love with God, growing each day in our relationship with God? By connecting with God through spiritual disciplines, holy habits, ongoing practices of faith that

“keep the relationship between us and God vital, alive, and growing.” (adapted *Three Simple Rules* p. 53)

God loves us, and consistently seeks a relationship with us. God asks of us, “Do you love me?”

And we are called to respond with a way of living that grows deeper in knowing and being known by God each and every day.

John Wesley called this third rule “Attend to the Ordinances of God.” The beauty of Bishop Job rewording this final rule to “Stay in Love with God” is that he reminds us that this rule is much more than the completion of a checklist of spiritual disciplines; rather, it is a way of life that nurtures a relationship and consistently connects us to the God who loves us.

As the eldest sibling in the family, my upgrades in technology and social media over the years have primarily been to keep in touch with my youngest sister. First it was AOL Instant Messenger. Then it was a cell phone for texting. Then it was Facebook. I kept up with technology as a way to nurture my relationship with my sister.

Yet when I look at my friends list on Facebook, I realize just how few relationships I have truly nurtured well over the years. Facebook and a class reunion connected me to high school classmates. Yet I really don’t know them more than what they share on social media.

If we are going to keep our relationships with others vital, alive and growing, we must nurture these relationships in whatever ways we can, in speaking and listening, in giving and receiving, in intentional time and effort, in forgiveness and even grace.

In the 1980s the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, MO made public 1,300 recently discovered letters that the late President wrote to his wife, Bess, over the course of a half-century. Mr. Truman had a lifelong rule of writing to his wife every day they were apart. He followed this rule whenever he was away on official business or whenever Bess left Washington to visit her beloved Independence. Scholars are examining the letters for any new light they may throw on political and diplomatic history. But many are simply impressed by the fact that every day he was away, the President of the United States took time out from his dealing with the world's most powerful leaders to sit down and write a letter to his wife.

 (Bits & Pieces, 10-15-92, pp. 15-16. sermonillustrations.com adapted)

President Truman knew how to nurture the relationship he had with his wife. We may schedule date nights with our spouses nowadays or coffee with close friends or vacations with other family members. But how often are we intentional about setting apart time to nurture the most important relationship of our lives, our connection with our God through faith in his Son Jesus?

If we are to have a vital, alive and growing relationship with God, then we need to spend time nurturing that relationship.

Which brings us to what John Wesley called the ordinances of God.

These ordinances are the spiritual disciplines, holy habits, and practices of faith that nurture our relationship with God, allowing us to know and be known, encouraging us into a more Christ-like way of living. John Wesley listed six ordinances, six means of grace, six holy habits whereby we strengthen our connection to God.

They are: public worship of God, the Lord’s Supper, private and family prayer, searching the Scriptures, Bible study, and fasting. (TSR p. 53)

These are the essential spiritual disciplines that ground us in God and form us together into the community of faith, the church.

As Christians we are called to worship God together, for our faith is a communal faith as we are all members of one another within the body of Christ. Our worship is grounded in the sacraments, and together we come to feast together at Christ’s table of Holy Communion,

also known as the Lord’s Supper. Jesus invites us to be his guests together sharing in the bread and cup.

Prayer is our communication with God, and we are called to practice both private and family prayer. How often do you lift up praise and concerns to God? When was the last time your family prayed together? Consider, though, that every time in worship when we share joys and concerns we are also praying together as the church family.

Searching the Scriptures and Bible study include not only hearing God’s Word, but also diving into the details of the Bible and its message for our lives today. The Bible is our family’s history book, and tells the story of God’s forgiveness and our redemption. I learn so much from all of you in our times of study together.

Finally, we are called to fasting, which may be from food, but can also be from social media or unhealthy substances or anything that can pull us away from God. Fasting and abstinence are intentional ways to focus less on ourselves and more of God.

Six ordinances of God, six holy habits to nurture our love for God within the context of the community of faith.

What are your holy habits that keep you in love with God? Are your spiritual disciplines daily prayer and time with God’s Word? Are they weekly worship within the community of faith and tithing as thankfulness to God’s goodness and grace? Are your habits fasting from food, TV, or whatever pulls you away from God and abstinence from unhealthy habits and addictions? Or are they Christian music on the way to work or acts of random kindness on the way home?

As diverse as we are sitting around this room today, our spiritual disciplines will also be diverse.

But to cultivate these holy habits, whatever our personality and nature, is essential to faithful living as followers of Christ.

So what do we learn from these spiritual practices, as diverse as they may be? Bishop Job proclaims: These practices “help keep us positioned in such a way that we may hear and be responsive to God’s slightest whisper of direction and receive God’s promised presence and power every day and in every situation. It is in these practices that we learn to hear and respond to God’s direction. It is in these practices that we learn to trust God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is in these practices that we learn of God’s love for us. It is where our love for God is nurtured and sustained. Incorporating these practices in our way of living will keep us in love with God and assure us of God’s love for us in this world and the world to come.” (TSR p. 55)

These “Spiritual disciplines also teach us to live our lives in harmony with something larger than ourselves and larger than that which the world values as ultimate.” (TSR p.54)

While we ground ourselves in our faith in God, we are reminded of our place in God’s great and mighty acts of salvation. Yet what we do in the name of Jesus must come out of our relationship with Jesus.

As one pastor put it, “Our inner spiritual life must have a way of expressing itself out in the world. And our outer, “helping others” life, must be nourished and supported by a strong inner spiritual life.” (Terry Van Hook 2-4-08 pastorterry.blogs.com/esoundings)

These holy habits encouraged by John Wesley nurture our inner life so that our faith can become a way of living. As Bishop Job says, “One who is deeply in love will be constantly formed and transformed by that relationship.” (TSR p. 58)

How are we formed and transformed by a relationship of love with God? Do we hear God ask of each of us this morning, “Do you love me?” And then, do we hear God ask of each of us the deeper question of love, “Then will you live for me?”

In our Scripture passage this morning Simon Peter is also asked this very same question by Jesus. Keep in mind that Peter had betrayed Jesus three times before his death. Yet Jesus does not condemn Peter.

Rather Jesus asks, “Simon, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

Then Jesus responds, “Feed my lambs.”

Three times Jesus asks Peter, “Simon, do you love me?”

And three times Peter responds, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

And Jesus responds, “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Follow me.”

Our love for God is shown in our obedience to do what Jesus calls us to do. Peter will now go on to be the leader of the early Christian movement, yet he will go where he did not expect to go.

He will see miracles he never expected to see, and experience persecution that he never wanted to experience.

Our journeys of loving God and loving neighbor will also take us often outside our comfort zones, to people or places we never expected, all because we are willing to follow where Jesus leads.

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.

All of this and more is asked of us because of our love for Jesus.

The good news today is, we do not begin this adventure of loving God and loving neighbor by ourselves. We never journey the path of faith alone. God is with us. Jesus is guiding us. And we are called to do no harm, do good and stay in love with God within and with the body of Christ, the community of faith, the church.

This final rule is not any easier than the first two rules. Living by the love of God is at times just as hard as living by the love of neighbor.

Think of how many times you get distracted from worship or from reading your Bible or from even from saying a prayer for your neighbor. Spiritual disciplines take time to cultivate and energy to make into priorities in our lives. How much easier is it to sleep in on a Sunday morning or to decide to watch another TV show than to gather with the flawed yet forgiven community and make time with God an essential part of our days. How much easier is it to make plans with friends then spend intentional time in God’s word. Even as your pastor I, too, am easily distracted from making this rule a way of living in my life.

Yet, God continues to love us. And God continues to yearn to be in closer relationship with us.

So we are called to make a choice to respond to God’s love with our love through cultivating holy habits that move us deeper in love with God.

Consider these words of the apostle Paul in Colossians:

“So live in Christ Jesus the Lord in the same way as you received him. Be rooted and built up in him, be established in faith, and overflow with thanksgiving just as you were taught.” (Col 2.6-7 CEB)

As we enter the month of February, when society focuses on romantic love, I invite you to focus on agape love, the love of God for us and our love for God and one another.

Choose one spiritual discipline, one holy habit, one ordinance to intentionally live into staying in love with God this month.

Make worship with the community of faith a priority

Spend more time in intentional prayer or the study of Scripture

Fast from whatever draws you away from God

And in all you say and do, give thanks for God’s mighty love for you! In a moment as we share in the bread and cup of Holy Communion, give thanks for this tangible sign of God’s love for us, and share together as a physical sign of our love for God.

Loving God and loving neighbor—that is the call of Jesus, of John Wesley, of Bishop Job today.

The three simple rules are easy to remember, but challenging to live as a faithful way of life:

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

Yet may we strive to do so, led by God, living by faith, sharing love and grace and hope with the world around us.

May it be so. Let us pray.