**Series: John Wesley’s Three Simple Rules - #1: Do No Harm**

**Matthew 5:38-48 and Romans 12:14-21 (NRSV)**

**By John Gill ~ January 28, 2024**

*(This sermon series is based on the book by Ruben Job, Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living.1)*

It's no secret that we live in a very divisive and contentious time. We can't turn on the TV or go to our social media platforms without being bombarded with news and posts that accentuate everything that divides us. It seems that there are forces on the extremes of our society that want to pit us against one another, as if igniting a civil war would somehow be “good” for America. Of course, that is insane. There would be no winners in an America that is ripped to shreds. We all would be losers. We all know this, but still the war-of-words, and even the threats-of-violence continue.

And sadly, those contentious forces have been at work in our own denomination and throughout the larger Church of Jesus Christ. As you no doubt are aware, our beloved United Methodist Church has recently experienced a schism, having been pulled apart by factions that are convinced that only their interpretation of what constitutes “faithful discipleship” is correct, and that all other views are heresy!

Again, it is hard to see how a schism in the church is beneficial to the Kingdom of God, or our positige witness as Christians to our divided nation. But alas, it has come to pass, and so we must make the best of a bad situation. Maybe I'm naive, but I am old enough to remember a time, not so long ago, that people were able to disagree, and still remain friends.

Such divisions and infighting as we have been experiencing in our denomination are antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In chapter 17 of John's Gospel, Jesus prays for his disciples and for all those who will come to believe through their witness - meaning us. Jesus prays “that they may all be one, just as you Father are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:20-21). I don't believe that Jesus was praying for uniformity, but for unity. There is a big difference!

As Christian Americans, we all face the challenges of our dual citizenships - of being both good citizens of a worldly nation, and good citizens of the Kingdom of God. It is vitally important that we are both... But working out our loyalties to each can be complicated. It is not easy to do, but we must try.

The American people are diverse in many ways, but we are all Americans, and we need to start acting like it! And the Christian Church is divided into countless denominations, sects, movements, and factions… and within the last few months, myriad of Christian factions has increased by one – as many congregations that have left our fellowship and created yet another denomination. No matter how many ways we divide ourselves, the truth is that we are all part of the same family of God, and it is high time we began acting like it. That is - if we want to fulfill the desire of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

How do we live in unity, even as Jesus and the Father are in unity? I suppose that goes back to what Jesus said when he was asked which commandment was most important. Jesus responded, “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.” Then he added, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That's good advice, and I'm sure that we all try to live it - in theory. But, how do we put it into practice? The world is complicated, it is not easy to know what is “most loving.”

Let me give you an example: In the past few years we have all endured the COVID pandemic. During that difficult time, we all struggled to know what to do to show our love: We asked ourselves these questions: “Is it more loving to stay home so that we could help flatten the curve of the pandemic and thereby protect the most vulnerable, or “Is it more loving to go out into the community and serve our neighbors in need?” “Do we show our love for others by avoiding shopping in crowded stores, or by deliberately frequenting businesses and restaurants so that they can survive, and their employees can provide for their families?” Which is more loving? “Is it more loving to attend worship in masks, or to attend on Facebook virtually so that those we love are protected from our germs?”

Am I the only person who struggled with questions like these? I don't think so.

That is only one area where figuring out how best to love others is complicated - but there are countless other areas of our lives where knowing how to love others is not easy to discern. It is not always simple to know what is the “right and loving” thing to do.

We live in a complex world with thorny issues. We need help knowing how best to live in loving unity. One tool that has helped many people untangle this complexity is John Wesley’s three simple rules, or what we in Methodism call “The General Rules.” (Anybody know what the “General Rules” are? You’re supposed to know them – and so we’re going to tell you! We have three Sundays, and so you’re going to learn it!). John Wesley, the leader of the people who took the name Methodist, was always trying to find plain and simple ways to distill-down the Christian faith to the basics... Guidelines for practical living as a disciple of Jesus.

In the early days of Methodism in England, the General Rules were among the first things new believers who were admitted into Methodist discipleship groups called “United Societies,”(there were no “churches” – it was a movement) – so when new folks joined these “United Societies, they were taught to adhere to the “Three General Rules” – It was the first thing they were taught. These simple rules helped Wesley's followers discern how to live lives of “loving unity.” And I believe that they are just as relevant today as they were almost 300 years ago. What are his three simple rules? (They are on the front of your bulletin.) They are: 1. Do no harm; 2. Do good; 3. Stay in love with God (or as Wesley said, “attend to the ordinances of God - which is “work on your own spiritual relationship with God).

This morning I would like to focus on the first general rule, “do no harm.” It sounds straightforward enough. Just three short words. Even the child should be able to understand what it means to “do no harm.”

But, as we try to put this rule into practice, we quickly discover that its simplicity is deceiving. Just as we'll discover with the other two rules, two and three, “doing now harm” will take a lifetime to master.

Just imagine what a difference it would make if we were to all commit to “doing no harm.” Imagine a world like that. Imagine for a moment… what would our political arena look like if our politicians adopted a policy of doing no harm, even if it is just that they would promise not to harm one another? Imagine what business would look like if the people in every workplace committed to doing no harm to one another or the public. How much more productive and healthy would organizations and churches be if everyone believed that no one was going to try to harm them in any way? If no one gossiped about another? Or ridiculed another? Or turned disagreements into accusations?

If we vowed to “do no harm” in our relationships with our friends and our neighbors, and with our family and our spouse, how different would our lives be?

In my personal life I have not always practiced this rule. Oh yes, I've intended to... But then find myself doing things or saying things that bring others pain. But, when I have been careful to do no harm, even when I was tempted to strike out at others thinking it would feel good in the moment, I am thankful I used restraint. I have found that when I live by this rule it transforms how I respond to the world around me. It helps me sort through the myriad of possible responses and choose the one that I think is most loving. Indeed, when we decide that we will not harm others, especially those with whom we disagree, it also transforms our conversations, whether in person or through social media.

When we guard our words with this first General Rule, our conversations change. No longer are they a competitions - debates to be won – but instead, our conversations become safe-places for people – places where people can share their hearts and needs, where all are heard, and all relationships can be strengthened. Imagine THAT world!

We can all recall these kind of transformative conversations in our own lives when the all parties practiced this first rule. We know the power of love to bridge-divides. And yet, often we slip-up and strike-out at others. We forget just how harmful our unguarded tongue can be.

The Apostle James speaks of the danger inherent in thoughtless words in the third chapter of the book that bears his name. He writes: If “we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or, take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” (James 3:4-5) (I like James – he is straight forward.)

We can't pretend that our words are not impactful. A single word like “idiot” or “fatso” can follow someone their whole life, penetrate their heart, and corrupt their sense of worth. Every person is created in the image of God with unimaginable worth, but hurtful words have a way of devaluing people. They end conversations, they destroy unity, they wound God's children. Words can do damage that never fully goes away.

There is a saying I'm sure you're familiar with that goes like this: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never harm me.” But, that is not true. Once spoken, words cannot be taken back. A careless word or deed can deeply wound others. And although those we have harmed may move on, or even forgive us, the scar never really goes away.

So, before we act, before we speak, we need to consider what effect our words and deeds may have on others. We need to ask, “Will what I'm about to do or say cause harm to someone else?” We need to decide in advance that we will “do no harm!”

What is true of individuals is even more true of groups. We are all aware of groups that are in constant conflict 9 (they just stir up conflice), sometimes over profound issues, and sometimes over issues that seem silly! Even so, their conflicts are real, the divisions are deep, and the consequences can be devastating.

As I have said, this is true in our culture as well as within the Christian Church. We are caught up in conflicts which often seem unresolvable. People have staked-out positions, battle-lines have been drawn, and, if the truth be told, it is not always easy to know who is right. Nor, is it easy to know what it means to “do no harm” in that situation. But if we will take Wesley’s advice, we might find a new way forward - the way of love!

As we struggle with issues today, it seems that each person has convinced themselves that they are absolutely “right,” which means that others must be absolutely “wrong.” We forget that people of faith and goodwill can stand on opposite sides of the divide. We foolishly take our cue from the divisive voices of our culture drawing lines-in-the-sand. We forget the bond that we share in Christ - the bond of Christian love - the supreme command of Christ, that we “love one another,” and all the rest will fall into place.

Perhaps, instead of asking the question, “Who is right and who is wrong?” we need to approach one another differently. Could it be that the issue is less about “who is right and who is wrong” than it is about “how we carry out the debate” and “how we treat one another in the midst of the conflict?” Could it be that doing no harm is less about right and wrong and winners and losers than it is about “how we play the game?”

I have come to believe (in my old age) that being a disciple is less about who is right and who is wrong, who is winning and who is losing, than it is about how we relate to one another in love!

As was read earlier in our scripture lessons, we serve a Lord who preached in his Sermon on the Mount, that - If someone slaps us on one cheek, we should turn the other. If someone wants our shirt, we should give them our coat. If a soldier forces us to carry their gear for one mile, we should carry it two. We serve a Lord who could have called down legions of angels to save him in order to prove that he was “right,” but instead, he submitted to the cross so that he might win - by losing!

Which means that, for us as disciples, it is less about who wins and who loses than how we treat one another in the process. It declares that “the end never NEVER justifies the means.” Indeed, since God has already determined the end, it is all about the means! Which makes it even more important that we “do no harm!”

In truth, if we decide ahead of time that we will “do no harm,” the whole tone of the conflicts change. And, we are changed. If we are determined to do no harm, we can no longer gossip about the conflict. We can no longer speak judgmentally about those on the other side. If we agree to do no harm, we can no longer manipulate facts or present only one side on argument. We can no longer diminish those who do not agree with us, knowing that they, too, are children of God.

We must acknowledge that, like us those on the other side are trying to “do what is right,” as they can understand it. We need to give them some grace. Which means that we must listen as deeply to their arguments as we do to the arguments of those we already agree with. Once our goal becomes “doing no harm” instead of “winning at all costs,” we will find it easier to listen deeply, and act out of love. We will give up our role as the “defender of the faith,” and trust God to defend the faith and to win the victories. It’s His job, by the way – not ours.

Which then frees us to simply love and care for those God has placed right in front of us! To “do no harm” means that people matter more than winning or being right, as we read from the Apostle Paul in Romans, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” In short, “do no harm.”

Don't get me wrong. This all sounds easy to do - but it is not! Deciding to trust God and to “do no harm” to others is hard. But we must try! We are called to try.

John Wesley believed so strongly in these three general rules that he asked all of those seeking ordination in the Methodist movement (from the days of John Wesley to this day) if they will abide by them. Among the 19 historic questions that all Methodist pastors down through the centuries have had to answer before their ordination are these: “Do you know the general rules? And, “will you keep them?”

While those questions were addressed to clergy, the expectation of Wesley was that all those who claim to be followers of Jesus, especially those who follow Jesus as Wesleyans, would also be able to answer: “Yes, I know them, and I will keep them.”

So, friends, now that you know the first of the general rules: “do no harm,” - the question is, “Will you strive to keep this most-basic-of-rules of the Christian life?”

If so, then you are one third of the way to becoming a true disciple of Jesus.

1 Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living, by Rueben Job. Abingdon Press. 2007

Other sources extensively used and quoted (each of whom also cited the Rueben Job book):

Do No Harm, by Leah Russo, First United Methodist Church of the St. Cloud Region, Sartell, MN (preached 5/16/2018)

Do No Harm, by Kim Fields, Central Church, Richland, WA (preached 6/21/2020)