**Series: John Wesley’s Three Simple Rules - #: Stay In Love With God**

**Colossians 2:6-7 and John 15;1-5 (CEB)**

**By John Gill ~ February 11, 2024**

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

Knock knock. Who's there? Peas. Peas who? Peas be my Valentine!

Knock knock. Who's there? Olive. Olive who? Olive you!

Knock knock. Who's there? Luke. Luke who? Luke who just got a Valentine!

This Wednesday, of course is Valentine's Day, the annual day we celebrate love. It also just happens to be Ash Wednesday – and I hope you will plan to participate in the morning to receive “drive by” ashes (7 – 8:30 a.m.), and attend our evening service at 7:00 p.m.

Of course, most of the people in our country will celebrate St. Valentine’s Day on Wednesday, rather than Ash Wednesday – because “love” is more appealing to folks than “self-reflection and denial.” The “love” our culture would have us celebrate on Wednesday is romantic love - a day to focus our attention on that special-someone in our life. If you have a special-someone in your life, I hope you will find meaningful ways this Wednesday to express your love for him or her.

I suppose this secular celebration of love on Valentine's Day is commendable – but the original meaning of Valentine's Day was not limited to celebrating our amorous love, but is a celebration of all love - including, the love we should have for God. Valentine was a Christian saint, after all.

So, it is fitting that our sermon on the third of the “Three Simple Rules” John Wesley gave us would fall on the week of Valentines’ Day and Ash Wednesday, because – it as all about our love for God – God’s Utimate Gift in Christ, God’s Valentine to the world!

Two weeks ago, we looked at the First Rule, “Do no harm,” as essentially living at peace with others, not returning evil for evil, avoiding gossip and lies which cause harm.

Last week, we explored how “Doing good” simply means living mercifully in the world - feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, serving those in need, and always being on the lookout for how God is calling us to serve others in love. We talked about how living like this, following John Wesley’s rules for Christian living --- this “doing all the good you can; by all the means you can; and all the ways you can; in all the places you can; at all the times you can; to all the people you can; as long as ever you can” – how living like this could be incredibly exhausting and spiritually, emotionally, and financially draining – unless we have healthy-boundaries and have some way to “fill our cup,” so we don't end up dried-out, running on fumes.

This week, we turn our attention to the Third and final of the Three Simple Rules, the one that taps us into our power source, and fuels us for faithful living – “Staying in love with God.” (Hold up a power strip.)

How many of you have one of these somewhere in your house? It's a power strip. You plug this into the wall, and then you plug a lot of things into it. We all probably have at least one in our living or family room, and it's got a variety of things plugged into it: our TV, our DVD and Blu-ray players, our cable box, maybe the wireless router, charging cables... and I’m sure, more! A power strip takes power from the source, and it gives power to all those devices. A lot of things depend on that power strip. 2 And, like that power strip, a lot of things depend on me – my family and friends, this church, our staff, the committees I work with, the Bible studies I lead, the people I counsel and minister to all throughout the week. They depend on me for love, leadership, guidance, companionship, pastoral care, and more.

Like this power strip, a lot of things depend on me, but unlike the power strip, far too often I do this. (Plug the power strip into itself.)

Instead of plugging into a source that gives me the power to help people, I just plug into myself. I try to do it all in my own power. I get up in the morning, and just jump right into the tasks I have lined up for the day. I rush from one commitment to the next thinking: “I need to do this, I need to prep that, I need to make this, that, or the other thing happen.” I go through the day like this (hold up the power strip), depending upon my own power and strength to get me through.

How many of you do the same? We run on our own power because we forget, or don't take the time, to connect ourselves into the Source of all life and love. 2

This power strip is a tangible and contextual way for us to illustrate how we need to connect ourselves into a Power beyond ourselves. (Put down the strip.)

But Jesus used a different image, one that was contextual, where and when he lived. He chose the image of a grape vine - something with which his contemporaries would have been very familiar. On a grapevine, the roots of the vine go down deep and draw in water and nutrients from the soil. The vine grows up and spreads along the trellis, branches sprouting from the vine. As long as these branches remain connected to that main vine, the nutrients will flow through the system, up the vine, through the branches, to produce grapes. 2

Jesus uses this image, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” to show how we are dependent on the strength and grace we receive from staying connected and tapped into God.

We heard a similar metaphor used in our text from Colossians, where Paul tells us to “Live in Christ Jesus the Lord by remaining rooted in him.” Both texts are telling us that we will remain vital and active in our faith, even when trouble comes, because we will always continue to draw strength from the Source of Life. 2

I wonder… How well are you “rooted in Christ?” Are you connected to the vine? Are you plugged in to the source? If so, what does that look like in your life? How do you remain connected to God? What kinds of things do you do to maintain that connection in the midst of our turbulent world? 2

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, worked on keeping his connection with God vital through “spiritual disciplines” and practices that he called “the ordinances of God,” or “the means of grace.”

Our tendency to plug into our own power-cord and to neglect our relationship with God is exactly why John Wesley said we need to make sure we always “stay in love with God,” regularly connecting with God to draw from God's strength and love. 2

If we are not careful in our faith, we can find ourselves drifting away from God, blaming God for bad things that have happened in our lives, or even, turning away from God completely, telling ourselves that we don't need God - that we've got everything under control.

Jesus saw it in the people he was trying to lead to faith; Wesley saw it; and I have seen it in each of the churches I have served. How do we keep from moving away from our faith in Christ, and turning away from God when everything goes crazy in our life? Or even, when everything is going well and we think we don't need God. 2

In her book, Illuminated Life, Joan Chittister puts it this way: “All we have in life is life… Things - the cars, the houses, the educations, the jobs, the money - come and go, turn to dust between our fingers, change and disappear… “The secret of life,” she says, “is that it must be developed - from the inside out.” 1

Spiritual disciplines teach us to live our lives in harmony with something larger than ourselves so that we can “stay in love with God.” Wesley says that some of these ways of growing in love (these means of grace or ordinances) are worship, hearing and studying scripture, Holy Communion, and prayer and fasting.

Then he writes this: “These are the general rules of our societies; all of which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written word, which is the only rule, and the sufficient rule both of our faith and practice. And all these, we know his spirit writes on truly awakened hearts.” 5

Now, don't be turned-off by the description of these rules and ordinances, as if they are burdensome tasks – a spiritual-checklist we must mark-off as we go through the motions of religion. They are not. They are simply the ordinary means by which God's Holy Spirit writes “on truly awakened hearts” (in Wesley's words). They are meant to help us develop and nurture a loving relationship with God.

I regularly encounter people who, once they find out I'm a minister, will tell me that they also are a Christian – and as we begin talking, I often find out that they don't attend church, because they tell me, “you don't have to be in a church to be a Christian.” They then tell me they don't pray, they don't read scripture, - they, in fact, don't do any of those things that Wesley says we need to do in order to be in a relationship with God. But they tell me they “love Jesus.”

I think that, on this week that we will celebrate Valentine's Day, it might be helpful to compare that person's logic with “love and marriage.” If I were to ask you about your marriage, and you told me that you - never talked to your spouse, never spent time with them, never sought to learn more about them, or never interacted with them in any way --- first, I would wonder what was going on; and second, I would tell you that your marriage is in serious trouble! Because, if you aren’t doing any of these things, you are not actually in “a relationship” at all!

To be in a relationship with someone - to be in love with someone - requires us to have an interaction - to be actively-engaged with that person. That is precisely what Wesley is talking about!

So, quickly, what are some of the ways we can nurture our love affair with God? 3

Although Wesley does not have “prayer” listed first, I would say that Prayer is the first and most important step in deepening our relationship with God. Prayer is a holy conversation. Just as we get to know about another person and come to love them more-and-more by talking with them, the same is true for prayer. And just as in our romantic relationships, prayer is as much, if not more, about listening than it is about talking. Does your prayer life with God mirror the ways you communicate with that “special someone” you love?

Now, in my experience, many people who say they never pray admit they don't know how. They think there is a “right way” and a “wrong way” to pray - and so, they never try. That's too bad, because all God wants from us is to share with him whatever is in our hearts - to be vulnerable and honest in sharing our emotions, and then, to sit in his presence long enough to let God speak. It's really not that complicated. All it requires is being intentional - to keep the channels-of-communication open, just as we know we should do in our communication with those in our lives we love. Honest and open communication is a secret to healthy relationships... with those we love, and even more so, with God. 3

The next thing Wesley enjoins us to do is to participate in Public Worship. At one time in my life, I was like the person I described a moment ago, who didn't think attending church was required to be a Christian. I grew up in a Parsonage, so for the first 17 years of my life, worship was not optional. When I went off to college, I thought I was liberated! No longer was worship a rule to be obeyed. And so, I spent several years not going to church, except when I went home. Maybe you went through a similar stage.

After a few years though, I was aware that the faith I had developed in high school had grown weak. I rediscovered how important being a part of a worshipping community is, in “staying connected to the vine of life.” 3

Wesley is quoted as saying, “Christianity is essentially a social religion; And… to turn it into a solitary religion, is indeed, to destroy it.” Pretty strong words!

Jesus addresses this directly in the Gospels. Notice - he does not say that “where one is gathered,” he is there. Instead, what does he say? “Where two or more are gathered, there I am in the midst of them.” Friends, we are on a journey, and journeys are always most successfully completed in groups. So it is with Christianity. Christ is found in the “gathered body of Christ.” So, attending church is essential to “staying in love with God.”

But even that is not enough. If attending church is the only spiritual food we are receiving, then we are starving ourselves to death. 3

This leads directly into the receiving of Holy Communion. Wesley believed so strongly in the power of communion that he received it four to five times a week, and even preached on the duty of “constant communion.”

The Methodist Church in America was founded in large part because the Anglican Church abandoned the Colonies due to the Revolutionary War, leaving a void of clergy who could consecrate the elements of communion. John Wesley took action to fill the void, to provide clergy who could give people, especially those in the Methodist Societies in America, the opportunity to receive communion. So, not surprisingly, it still is the official position of the United Methodist Church that we should be serving communion every week. It is that important! 3 In all the congregations I have served since 2000 (beginning with my first appointment to Tomoka as pastor), I have instituted a weekly communion in some form. Weekly Communion is new part of the essential DNA of this congregation.

In many Christian traditions, altar-calls are offered at the close of every service – and they are important in many Methodist churches, especially in the Bible Belt. But throughout our history, the invitation to come to the altar to receive Holy Communion IS our “altar call.” It is the time in which we come forward pledging ourselves anew to Christ. It is the time when we reaffirm our love for God. 3 It is the way Methodists call people to the altar every Sunday!

One of the reasons that we United Methodists practice Open Table communion (where all are welcome to receive, regardless of membership status) is because Wesley believed that communion could be a “converting sacrament” - that is, in receiving the elements a person could be moved to accept Jesus’ saving actions on their behalf, and be saved! Holy Communion IS the “Methodist altar-call.” It reaffirms our personal connection to Christ. It is the “means of grace” available at every service.

Finally, Wesley enjoins us to focus on Scripture. Wesley has this as two different points: the first being the reading or hearing of scripture, and the second, the searching of the scriptures. 3

In addition to prayer, reading the Bible should be a part of your spiritual life. Now, - just like with prayer, I know that people often don't read scripture - for various reasons. The first reason I often hear is that they don't know where to start. I would not recommend that you start at Genesis and work your way straight through the Bible to Revelation because, unless you have incredible fortitude, you'll never make it, and it won't make too much sense. You will probably get bogged-down in the Book of Leviticus, become discouraged, and stop. 3

Instead, I would suggest you follow a reading plan. There are many available - and if you want help with that, I'll be glad to help you find one. Or, if you want some guidance on the order of books of the Bible that might be most helpful, here is where you should begin: First, read the Gospel of John, then the other Gospels and the Book of Acts. Next, read Paul's Letter to the Romans. That will give you the basics. It will at least get you reading.

So first, we are to read scripture. But, Wesley also wants us to search the scriptures. Studying the Bible is the only way it will make sense to you, and truly impact your life.

Wesley once wrote this: “I advise everyone, before he reads the Scripture, to use this... prayer: ‘Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which Thou hast given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.’ Amen.” 4

If we approach our reading and reflecting on scripture with this prayer, the Holy Spirit will reveal Truths of God to us!

And, searching the scriptures is best done in groups. Here at Tomoka UMC, we have several Bible study options offered each week for you to participate in: Pastor Bob Williams leads Sunday School after worship every week. Brenda Williams and Joan Monte teach our children’s class. Jean Brown leads the Women's Bible Study every Wednesday morning at 10:00 a.m. And, I lead the overview of the Bible called “Disciple” each year. We will be starting over again with a new group in the fall. And, in addition, we have three “Plus One” discipleship groups going, and are looking to start a new one soon.

These ordinances of God are the spiritual disciplines that can help us build a strong and vital loving relationship with God!

This Third Simple Rule is what makes Rules One and Two possible. It is the way we have the vitality and power to “do no harm” and “to do good,”... even when it is hard! In fact, staying in love with God is the key to our very salvation! 3

Let me give you one other way to think about it. A United Methodist pastor, Zan Miller, has said that you and I need to be leading “cross-centered lives,” something with which Wesley would certainly agree. And the Three Simple Rules: Do no harm, Do good, Stay in love with God - are designed to help us achieve this cruciform life. 3

A cross is made-up of two lines. Miller says that, as disciples of Jesus, we need both parts of the cross, - the horizontal and the vertical. The horizontal represents our relationship with others - loving others, doing no harm, doing good, etcetera. The vertical represents our relationship with God - practicing the means of grace in order for us to “stay in love with God.”

When we only have the vertical relationship (our relationship with God, our works of piety), then we are missing a piece. And, when we only have the horizontal (our relationship with others, our works of mercy), then we are also missing a piece. In order to lead a cross-centered life, we need to have both, the vertical and the horizontal. 3

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he said it was “to love the Lord your God” - with what?... “with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength,” (the vertical) - AND – “to love your neighbor as yourself,” (the horizontal).

So, how do we live a Christian life? We focus on the cross. And we live cross-centered lives - by living the Three Simple Rules. 3

You cannot practice only one of the Rules, and be complete. Doing no harm, leads to doing good, which leads to staying in love with God, which, in turn, leads to doing no harm, which leads to doing good, which leads to staying in love with God. They all feed-on and build-off-of each other. Each one is important, yes! But all three are necessary to lead a cross-centered life. 3

When we live-out the Three Simple Rules, - when we do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God, - then our lives are transformed. When we live-out the Three Simple Rules in our churches, then our churches are transformed. When we live-out the Three Simple Rules in our communities, then our communities are transformed. When we live-out the Three Simple Rules in our nation, then our nation is transformed. And, when we live-out the Three Simple Rules in our world, then our world is transformed. 3

So first, “Do no harm.” Second, “Do good.” Third, “Stay in love with God.” We are called to “love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds, soul, and strength,” AND, we are called “to love our neighbor as ourselves.” We are called, in other words, to live cross-centered lives, and we do that by “Doing no harm,” by “Doing good,” and by “Staying in love with God.” 3

It's just that simple.

And, just that challenging!

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

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

2 Jessica Brendlier Naulty, United Methodist Church of Red Bank, NJ. Stay In Love With God (most of the first half of the sermon) preached August 4, 2019

3 John Nash. Rule Three: Stay in Love With God. Blog August, 2011

4 <https://studybible.info/version/Wesley>

5 https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church#:~:text=Fasting%20or%20abstinence.,writes%20on%20truly%20awakened%20hearts.