

Wesley United Methodist Church  
June 14, 2020  
Scripture: Galatians 5:13-15, 22-26  
Matthew 7:7-12  
Three Simple Rules  
Do No Harm<sup>i</sup>

Everything seems to be more of a challenge right now and we are working hard at trying to find ways to deal with all the unusual things that have been happening this year. I found myself turning to a small book that, for me, contains gems of wisdom about an easy to understand plan for how to live our lives as followers of Christ; especially when all around us the world seems to be in chaos and our own lives are filled with a wide range of emotions.

Bishop Rueben P. Job wrote this tiny book – about 75 pages long - called “Three Simple Rules – A Wesleyan Way of Living”. He wrote it to explain – in a nutshell what John Wesley saw as the key to living a faithful Christian life. They are three simple rules that have the power to change the world – although it will probably take all our life to grow into fully living them.

In the Preface, Bishop Job wrote: “We long for some way to cut through the complexities and turbulence of everyday life. We search for a way to overcome the divisiveness that separates, disparages, disrespects, diminishes, and leaves us wounded and incomplete.”<sup>ii</sup> Doesn’t that sound a lot like the world of today?

He continued, “The path we are on has become so well worn that only a radical change can jar us out of the deep ruts of our dilemma. And this radical change is possible because we see the devastating cost of going on as we are. Continuing on as we are is no longer a viable option.

The risks are too high and the results too costly. But where are we to turn; what are we to do?”<sup>iii</sup>

Covid-19, the protests and marches that have been filling our streets, the responses to those protests, the rhetoric from government leaders all combine to proclaim that we cannot continue as we were even a few months ago.

So where do we turn as we try to make sense of all this, as we make decisions about how to live together in a world that will look different in many ways? The only place that I know to turn is to God – the one who created us, and “loves us as we are and yet always seeks to lead us to become more than we are.” When asked what the greatest commandment was, “Jesus said it was to love God and to love our neighbor.

John Wesley put that into three rules, As Bishop Job points out they are so clear that they can be taught and practiced by everyone. They are accessible and inviting to young and old, rich and poor, powerful and weak, and those of every theological persuasion.

As I said before, very simply they are: Do no harm. Do Good. Stay in Love with God. Thirteen years ago, Bishop Job wrote, “Most of us never imagined we would be living in such a divided world. People of my age, who lived through the Second World War were convinced that our world would be drawn together in harmony, peace and plenty. The sacrifices made were so enormous that it seemed certain that we would never again permit our world to become so divided. But here we are in a world where divisions are growing deeper nearly every day.”

Today, those words seem even more true. We want to live our lives in ways that are faithful to God and that are healing and life-giving, not destructive and life-denying. The reading from Galatians reminds us that

we are people who are free, but that we can't let that freedom be used to indulge only our own desires. Instead we are to serve others through love. This is an absolute basic action of Christianity. We proclaim that God created all people and loves all people. If we believe that to be true, then we are to treat all people as we wish to be treated.

John Wesley says that the first step in doing this is first to do no harm. As we here in this church have discussion about how and when to resume some form of in-person worship, one of our first considerations is that we want to be sure that it is safe. We do not want to cause harm to anyone else. As much as many of us would love to be sitting together in the pews here and singing our favorite songs together and having fellowship with each other afterwards, it is simply not safe. To indulge our desire would be to potentially put others at harm.

Bishop Job says that this first rule, to do no harm, can provide a safe place to stand while we do the hard and faithful work of discerning the direction for any issue. As he notes, "When we agree that we will not harm those with whom we disagree, conversation, dialogue and discovery of new insights become possible. When our words and actions are guarded by this first simple rule, we have time and space to think about the consequences before a word is spoken or an action taken."<sup>iv</sup>

As a child, I remember that when someone called us a name, we would turn around and say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me." It was a brave proclamation, but it was blatantly false. Words can hurt and they can hurt a great deal. I remember that some of the kids in the neighborhood had a nickname for me. It wasn't really anything horrible, and it might even have been considered funny, but it did poke at something about which I was very sensitive. Even now, I find

it hard to tell anyone about that nickname. A broken bone would have healed so much faster.

When we do no harm, we are careful about what we say and how we say it. I would love to tell you that I learned that and that I control my words so that they never cause harm, but I can't. Being human, even when I try, sometimes I say something that hurts another person and for that I am deeply sorry. This week, very unintentionally, I caused harm to someone by something I said, and I deeply regret that.

No one said these rules were going to be easy, but we have to start somewhere, and this is as good a place as any to begin. I imagine that most of us think that we do not do harm to others. We don't intentionally hurt another person. We don't beat up someone if they are in our way. Presumably, we try to use our words to resolve disagreements, but we do need to pay attention to the words we are using and their effect on someone else.

If we took this simple rule seriously, we would find that we examine the way we live our lives and practice our faith and we would very likely discover that there are ways that we need to change. The good news is that in making those changes we are not alone. When we identify ways that we need or want to change so that we can be more of the people God created us to be, we can count on God to be with us and to help us in that change. We can count on the Holy Spirit to open our eyes, our ears, our mouths, and our heart so that we can better live as faithful Christians seeking to do no harm to any of God's creation.

So, speaking of creation. It's not only other people that we unintentionally harm. One of the side effects of so much of the world being shut down for a while was that the smog in cities started to disappear and

animals started to come out of hiding. Can we examine our lives so that we do less harm to God's beautiful creation?

More recently, I have become much more aware of another way that I cause harm, and that many of us cause harm. Bishop Job wrote, "To do no harm means that I will be on guard so that all my actions and even my silence will not add injury to another of God's children or to any part of God's creation."<sup>v</sup>

As a pastor, I recognize that I am pastor to people who have many different opinions and perspectives. I have always tried to be sensitive to that. However, I have also come to understand that in my desire to not antagonize someone or hurt someone by disagreeing with them, I have hurt others by my silence.

Yes, not only our actions, and our words, but even our silence can cause harm. When my black brothers and sisters ask me to see the pain and the racism that they experience daily and I stand by silently, I am doing harm. When my gay brothers and sisters cry out for full inclusion in the church and I stand by silently, I am doing harm.

It's really hard for people with my color skin to think of skin color as something that makes a big difference in someone's life, but it does. I am slowly reading a book called "White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism" by Robin Diangelo. Although I'm only on page 20 and I have a long way to go, I highly recommend this book.

This week and last as protests and marches continued, I found myself drawn to a book I have owned for a while but hadn't read yet. It was written in 1987 by Pamela Chatterton Purdy. Pam and her husband, Rev. David Purdy are the parents of 4 children: 2 biological daughters who are white, an adopted son who is black, and Hoang Stephen, their fourth child

who was born in Vietnam the son of a Vietnamese woman and a black American soldier. Her book “Beyond the Babylift, the Story of an Adoption” tells about their lives after they adopted Hoang Stephen.

I know David and Pam. David was my district superintendent many years ago and he and I currently serve together on the District committee on Ministry.

When Stephen was 11 years old, a young adult physically assaulted him, smashing his head into a coke machine in a neighborhood store and called him racist names, while people stood by and watched. David wrote a letter to the editor of the Winchester Massachusetts Newspaper where they lived.

He ended the letter with words that continue to haunt me. He talked about trying to explain to his son why he was better off here than if he had been left behind in Vietnam and then he wrote, “But that brutal attack on a beautiful June afternoon in one of America’s most affluent suburbs causes me to wonder: when citizens stand by and watch without lifting a finger to help, when an 11-year-old is called vicious racist names, is he free, can he be at peace, does he have a chance?”

“We write this letter in the hope that it will help to remind all of us that none of us lives in peace and freedom when we fail to be responsible to and for one another, and when racism continues to bubble beneath the surface waiting for a child to become its target.”<sup>vi</sup>

David wrote those words June 18, 1981. Twenty-nine years later, these words are still true. Our silence is a powerful way to do harm. A white colleague in Maine and his children wrote on their sidewalk, “White silence is violence.” Are we willing to sit with those words for a few minutes and let them sink in?

A black Providence firefighter told about being racially profiled by a white police officer one night, while he was in front of the fire station where he was on duty. He concluded his story with the famous words that the only thing that evil needs to flourish is the silence of good people.

Yes, we can do harm even with our silence. This is one area where I will be doing a lot more self-examination in the days and weeks to come, and quite frankly, I'm scared because I don't know where God will lead me in that examination, but I trust that God will be with me.

None of us is free from doing harm even though it most often it is unintentional or in ways we don't recognize. I invite you to join me on this journey of trying to live with Wesley's three simple rules. The first, Do no harm, needs the other two to go with it and we will be talking about those in the next two weeks. Do good. Stay in Love with God.

Let us pray:

Our loving God, it is painful when we look carefully at ourselves and discover things we would rather not see. Open our eyes, open our ears, open our hearts so that we can see in ourselves the places where we fall short of being the people you call us to be. At the same time, help us to see that even with all of our flaws, that you love us as we are, and then invite us to grow and to change a little bit each day so that we become more and more like the people you know we can be. Help us to share your love wherever we are. Help us to learn to do no harm. Help us to do good. And help us to stay in love with you – even as you are always in love with us. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Much of the basis of this sermon comes from Bishop Rueben P. Job's book "Three Simple Rules, A Wesleyan Way of Living"

<sup>ii</sup> P.7

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iii P.8

iv P.21

v P.31

vi Purdy, Pamela Chatterton. Beyond the Babylist: A Story of an Adoption. C. 1987, Abingdon Press p.152