

Wesley United Methodist Church
June 21, 2020
Scripture: Acts 10:34-38
Luke 6:27-36
Three Simple Rules
Do Goodⁱ

Nobody ever said it would be easy to follow Jesus and his teachings and he doesn't make it any easier in the Gospel reading we just heard. "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. ... Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you."ⁱⁱ

Many of us have heard these words so often that we have almost become immune to them. It has been said that "The trouble with some of us is that we have been inoculated with small doses of Christianity which keeps us from catching the real thing."ⁱⁱⁱ I don't know if that is true or not, but I do know that what Jesus is saying is really very radical and not easy to put into practice.

Last week, I started to talk about Wesley's Three Simple Rules for living – rules that are simple to understand but challenging to live if we take them seriously. The first was "Do No Harm" and particularly in today's context, I noted that in addition to the ways we normally might think about of not doing harm, a more challenging one is that we also do harm with our silence.

Today, we are talking about the second rule, "Do Good". It is easy to think of many ways that we can and are doing good and they are all reasons to celebrate. A couple of weeks ago, we collected about 200 each of pancake mix and syrup to be distributed by the Northern RI Food Pantry. For the next few weeks our goal is to collect 200 cans of tuna fish and after that we will be collecting 200 cans of canned fruit.

Through our young adults we are sending a meal to the housekeeping staff of the Aldersbridge communities as a way of honoring them and saying thank you for their faithful work during this pandemic. Everyday we find ourselves in positions where as individuals we can do something good for another person.

Doing good is a serious challenge from Wesley and it is a direct command from Jesus. It sounds simple enough and we can begin anywhere with the first thing in front of us.

The catch is that we are to “do good” not only to our family and friends, but also to people who we may not even like. We are to do good to people who look different than us, to people who disagree with us politically, to people who we may not think even deserve us to do something good for them.

In the reading from Acts, we just heard, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another.” Doing good is something we do simply because God is good to us, God loves us, and that “circle of goodness^{iv}” flows from God to us and through us to the world.

Sometimes we may be hesitant to do good because we want to be in control of what we do, and how we do it, and how what we do is received. We may be afraid that our offer will be rejected, or that someone may misuse what we do for them. We can’t control how someone responds to what we do. But the reality is that our desire to do good is in direct response to God’s invitation to follow Jesus and the decision to follow Jesus is in our control.

If, as we believe, God does indeed love all, then that means that we need to seek the good for all. We need to seek what is best for those whose position and condition is different than ours. In doing good, we seek to heal the wounds of others. We use words and actions that heal and bring together rather than ones that wound and divide.

If we all started to “do good”, then movements that seek to divide and conquer would become movements that seek to unite and to empower all people. Doing good means that we are more focused on what is the common good rather than what is good for only ourselves.

This does not mean that we do not pay attention to ourselves and our needs. The commandment from Jesus is to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. That means if we want ourselves to have enough food, then we also want others to have enough food. If loving ourselves means that we want our families to be safe, then we also want that for all of God’s children. If we allow what is good for the community to be our guide, rather than our own personal needs, that will bring us closer to what both John Wesley and Jesus had in mind.

We do not know what the result will be of doing good – and we don't, or shouldn't, do what is good so that we are rewarded or praised. But the ripple effect may be far more than we can ever imagine.

Duane Thomas was a pastor and youth worker at a church in Buffalo, New York when the mother of a brother and sister in his youth group died suddenly. The sister, age 17, went to live with her grandmother and Thomas offered to let the brother, age 18, live with him and his family “as long as he promised to do the dishes and his homework.”^v

I think we can probably agree that Duane Thomas was doing good. He described the young man living with him as a good kid, a peaceful person who always wanted to see that others were being taken care of. As he was finishing high school and hoping to go to a trade school, he rented an apartment from his aunt so that he and his sister could live together.

On May 29th, the young man Antonio Gwynn Jr, marched for hours in downtown Buffalo to protest the killing of George Floyd, then went home to catch some sleep. The next morning, he was shocked to discover that the peaceful streets had turned violent after he left with a confrontation between protestors and U. S. Marshals in front of the federal courthouse. He said, “I was sad to watch all of that. There was a huge mess downtown. I thought, ‘I should go out there and clean it all up.’”

So, he did. He took the small U-Haul truck that he had rented to move some of his belongings to the house he had just rented from his aunt. At 2 a.m. on June 1, “he threw a broom, a dustpan and two large boxes of garbage bags into the back of the truck and headed to Bailey Avenue, where much of the damage had happened.”^{vi}

He decided to start at one end of the street and make his way down the street. He said, “It was pretty quiet, and I thought maybe I could finish cleaning before people started going to work. He swept up broken glass, discarded protest signs and litter for about 17 blocks until almost noon. He filled nearly two dozen trash bags and took most of them home with him to set out on his curb in time for the neighborhood's garbage pickup.

Later, he discovered that what he had done was all over Facebook. He went out there simply to do something good. However, the ripples of what he did fanned out

until he was national news. His dream had been to start his own auto repair shop. A local college presented him with a four-year scholarship so that he could begin business classes this fall. Other people came forward to offer him money for living expenses and one person even gave him a car.

Gwynn said, “It was unbelievable. I didn’t do this for any attention. I just didn’t want people to have to drive through all that trash on the street.”

He was one person doing something that he saw needed to be done. Rather than sitting around expecting someone else to take care of the mess – that he didn’t create– he decided to do something.

In our world today, there are so many messes that we personally did not create, but we can be the hands and feet of Christ doing something good to begin to help clean up those messes.

Just after I read about Antonio Gwynn Jr, I read a devotional article by Gary Melville from the United Methodist Foundation. Gary described being in a church before COVID 19 when at the end of the service people stood in a circle and sang, “Let there be peace on earth” Gary said that on that particular morning what really jumped out at him was when they, and he, sang “Let it begin with me.”

He wrote, “‘Let it begin’ is both a prayer and an announcement of a new birth. It is also a starting gun for a race or a new journey. So there I was, standing in a circle, linked by hands, if not hearts, part of a community of faith. Yet, I was singing, proclaiming let it begin with me. Such is our faith, personal holiness connected tangibly through our social holiness.”^{vii}

He continued, “In all things in the spiritual life whether it be humility, generosity, justice, my yes combined with your yes is the beginning of change, as individuals and of the community. The yes is allowing Jesus to reform, remold us in his image. And to let it be done to me, to let it begin with me, I have to let go of me, my self-centeredness.”^{viii}

We can begin by doing good with the first thing that presents itself to us. We can begin today to make a change by doing good wherever we find ourselves, wherever God leads us.

Dr. Jim Denison in “The Daily Article” for June 18th wrote, “I can do more than respond to the past. I can help create the future. So can you. ...Our Lord has made us

his physical presence in our world and commissioned us to bring his word and love to everyone we can. (God) will speak when we speak, care when we care, and touch lives when we touch them.”^{ix}

The first two rules, “Do No Harm, Do Good”, are important and they can bring immediate results. But without the third rule, “Stay in love with God” they can become increasingly impossible. Many of us are walking around asking what we can do to help make things better – and there are things we can and should do – but on our own we cannot fix what is happening around us.

Bishop Reuben Job reminds us, “Legislation and committees will not solve our divisiveness, our woundedness, or our brokenness.”^x We cannot do it on our own, that’s why “staying in love with God” is the essential third simple rule that will round out and support the other two and will empower us to live lives that witness to God’s love for all.

Let us pray:

Our loving God. There is so much happening around us that it is hard for us to know what to do or where to begin. Place before us that first thing – that way of “doing no harm; that way of “doing good” that can make a difference in the life of someone that you love. Help us to see others as you see them and to love them as you love. Sustain us and guide us as we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus, by doing no harm, by doing good, and by staying in love with you. Amen.

ⁱ Much of the basis of this sermon comes from Bishop Rueben P. Job’s book “Three Simple Rules, A Wesleyan Way of Living”

ⁱⁱ Luke 6:27-28, 31 CEB

ⁱⁱⁱ Google tells me that this is from Leslie Weatherhead but I have been unable to locate the exact source.

^{iv} Job, Rueben P. Term used by him on p.38

^v The information for this account comes from Washington Post, June 12, 2020

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Melville, Gary. Director of Development, United Methodist Foundation of New England. Devotional. “Let me.” 6/17/20

^{viii} Ibid

^{ix} Denison, Jim. “The Daily Article” June 18, 2020

^x Job, p.48