

Wesley United Methodist Church
June 28, 2020
Scripture: Colossians 2:6-7
John 21:15-17, 19b
Three Simple Rules
Stay in Love With Godⁱ

A few nights ago, I found myself complaining that I just didn't want to hear anymore about COVID 19, about Black Lives Matter, about any political topic, and quite frankly, about anything at all. I was tired, physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. At the same time, I recognized that my desire to not hear anymore about Black Lives Matter was, in itself, an example of the privilege I have as a white person because I have the luxury of turning off my thinking for awhile if it becomes too much.

Now, let me say two things. The first is that I absolutely believe that we all need to take a break from the news or from any stressful item from time to time. It's called taking care of yourself and it is very important to do.

The second thing I want to say is that this was not just about self-care, at least not in that way. It was an all too familiar pattern, that sometimes takes me a little while to

recognize. It's something that I experience periodically and something I know how to fix, but sometimes I don't recognize it immediately.

You see for about three or four days, I had had early morning commitments, or I had slept a little later than usual or I could give you some other excuses, but the reality was that I had gotten sloppy about the time I spend daily in meditation, devotions and prayer. I have always struggled with being really good at this and so my friend and I have agreed multiple times that we will hold each other accountable by texting each day when we have finished those things. There had been a distinct lack of texting taking place on both sides.

We recognized it and re-affirmed our commitment to pay closer attention to this part of our lives. We finished our call and I went outside to read my daily Bible passages and the ones I had missed, read some other devotionals I usually read, and spend quiet time just listening to God. Within about an hour, we had each texted the other to report on our activity.

The irony for me in all this was that I was preparing or trying to write a sermon titled, “Stay in love with God” and I was pushing God aside for other things. Now, I’d love to tell you that my time that morning was wonderful and uplifting and inspiring and that I was immediately back on track, but that wouldn’t be the truth. The truth is that it takes me a few days to start to remember how really important this is to me, how it truly affects my well-being in all ways.

The pages of the sermon were still blank and then I realized that what was happening with me was one of the best examples of why it is so important to stay in love with God and what happens when I do not actively pay attention to and nurture my relationship with God.

For the last two weeks, I’ve been talking about Wesley’s Three Simple Rules: Do No Harm. Do Good. Stay in Love with God. I have said that as good as the first two rules are, it is very difficult to do the first two without the third. Oh, sure we can still do good things. We can still try to be intentional about doing no harm, but without the third, staying in love with God, the other two

can become burdensome, or we can become subject to another malady – sometimes called compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is sometimes identified when we become indifferent to appeals on behalf of those who are suffering. It can be characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion, and it leads to a diminished ability to empathize or to feel compassion for others. Some people describe it as the negative cost of caring.

It can happen to first responders when they fail to take care of their own mental health needs when they are busy helping others. It can happen when we fail to pay attention to the balance between work and our personal lives. There is good evidence that people who have a strong personal faith and spirituality and who pay attention to that, experience an increased motivation and satisfaction that can reduce the effects of compassion fatigue.

This staying connected with God, staying in love with God is really important. The thing is that I am most likely to identify how important it is in my life when I am most actively paying attention to God, when I am most often

noticing how much I love God and when I am being grateful for how much God loves me. That's when I realize how important it is. When I start to get sloppy about it, it takes time for me to notice what I'm missing.

How do we stay in love with God? The typical and general answer is that we stay in love with God by following and living some of the practices that help keep the relationship between God and humans vital, alive, and growing. John Wesley identifies these as including participating in the public worship of God, partaking in the Lord's Supper, having a time of private and family prayer, and participating in Bible Study or other means of growing in our faith and fasting. These spiritual disciplines keep us fit, exercise our spiritual muscles, and keep us focused on living our lives in harmony with God.

The exact way we put these into practice will look different for each of us; because in God's wisdom, we were all created differently. What works really well for me might drive you crazy, and what you find helps you stay close to God might not have the same effect for me. For instance, I have never really practiced the discipline of

fasting; it doesn't seem to help me focus on God, although I admit that I've never really given it a serious try, but I know others for whom this is a really important practice.

What works best for you? A morning walk? Coloring mandalas? Listening to music? Meditation? Quiet prayer or maybe a more active prayer practice? Walking a labyrinth? There are many different practices and we each need to find what is most helpful for us.

One of my precious and absolutely necessary practices involves meeting weekly with two companions on the journey. We live in three different states and we meet by Skype and have been meeting for about 6 years now. We are able to share with each other, and also to challenge each other, and one of them is the person with whom I text daily to help hold us accountable. The other is a person who has different spiritual practices than the two of us, but they are practices that help him stay connected to and in love with God.

In today's Gospel reading, Peter is asked by Jesus, "Do you love me?" Jesus asks him three times – most likely because on the night that Jesus was betrayed, Peter

denied three times that he was a follower of Jesus and denied even knowing Jesus. What is really striking about this dialogue is that this is not a case of Jesus needing to be reassured by Peter. When Peter responds, “Yes, Lord, I love you.” Jesus doesn’t say, “Oh, I’m so glad to hear that.” Instead he tells Peter what to do. “Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

Loving Jesus and caring for Jesus’ sheep go hand in hand. And who are Jesus’ sheep and lambs? We are. Every single one of us. If we love Jesus, then he expects that we will take care of those whom he loves. And he loves everyone. We can’t pick and choose who we will take care of. As I said last week, we can’t decide who deserves for us to do good to them.

It’s like a circle of caring and loving. God loves us. We love God. We take care of those whom God loves. God loves everyone, including us. In response we love God, and we take care of those whom God loves. God loves you and me. We love God. And it just keeps going round and round.

Sunday night, 31-year-old, Daylan McLee of Uniontown, Pennsylvania was at home when he heard what sounded almost like an explosion. He ran outside and discovered that there had been a car crash and that one of the vehicles – a police car – was on fire. Daylan ran to the car and managed to pull the police officer out of the mangled car as the flames began to spread into the cabin saving his life. He didn't hesitate for even a minute. He says that he thought, "This guy deserves to make it home safely to his family."

Now, what I haven't told you yet is that Daylan is black. The police officer is white. On two occasions, Daylan has been wrongfully arrested and racially profiled. The Associate Press reports that on one occasion his sister called him from a bar scared because a fight had broken out. He rushed there and quickly disarmed a man outside with a gun and threw the gun off to the side. Police said that he pointed a gun at them and fired two shots. At least one trooper fired at him as he ran away.

He "spent a year in jail before a jury acquitted him on the charges after reviewing the video. That was a year

away from his children, and a year away from his mother, who was ill at the time.” The security footage showed that he had, in fact, disarmed the man with the gun and immediately threw it aside, and he did not start to run until shots were fired.

One might have understood if he had hesitated to get involved, potentially risking his life, by trying to save the life of a white police officer. However, what he said was, “There is value in every human life. We are all children of God and I can’t imagine just watching anyone burn. No matter what other people have done to me, or other officers, I thought, ‘This guy deserves to make it home safely to his family.’”ⁱⁱ

I read about Daylan McLee in one of the devotional emails that I read as I was getting myself back on track. God does work in interesting ways. The author of the article, Dr. Jim Denison, focused on Daylan’s words, “There is value in every human life. We are all children of God.” As Dr. Denison pointed out, the second sentence, explains the first. We are all children of God and that means that there is value in every human life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some are quick to counter proclamations of “Black Lives Matter” with the assertion that “All Lives Matter” and that is certainly very true. However, as a 22-year-old woman said in Milwaukee recently, “I know some believe that all lives matter but in the end all lives don’t matter until black lives matter.”^{iv}

Again, as Daylan McLee said, “There is value in every human life. We are all children of God.” And “all” means “all”. We can’t proclaim that “all lives matter” until we live as if every life really does matter.

Frederick Buechner, an American writer and theologian, puts it this way, “God doesn’t love people because of who they are, but because of who God is.”^v When we stay in love with God, and allow God to speak in and through our lives, we can begin to see things that we may not have been able to see before. We can see the value in each individual life, not only in a collective “all”. It is God’s nature to love each person, and the more we stay in love with God, the more we will allow God to make that part of our nature as well. **Insert picture of “Mission Logo”**

The reading from Colossians reminded us to “Be rooted and built up in Christ, to be established in faith, and to overflow with thanksgiving just as (we) were taught.”

(remove the photo?)

I invite you to take these three rules seriously. Maybe we can hold each other accountable or provide support for one another. They are simple to understand, but not as easy to live out. Still we can start right now, right where we are. Do no harm. Do Good. Stay in love with God. Remember that they are interwoven and we will find it impossible to do one without the others.

Let us pray:

Loving God. We are so grateful that you do love each and every one of us and that you call us to love all the people that you love. When we find that hard to do, fill us with an extra measure of your love so that we can share it. Open our eyes, our ears and our hearts so that we can see the places where we do harm without intending to do so. Help us to live so that we Do no harm. Help us to live our lives so that we do good, and empower us to do this 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 https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2020-06-23/man-wronged-in-past-by-police-saves-officer-from-burning-car?utm_medium=email&_hsmi=90124816&_hsenc=p2ANqtz--m9cynZQA2_BCcVti3PbXXBvLzOPVQTM3uJ7i4VbIV-CEO024EDJCrmyfpXnF1OEe5YXrkYXjAb7A7qEo0Rpff1x55w&utm_content=90124816&utm_source=hs_email

ⁱⁱⁱ Denison, Jim, Dr. "The Daily Article", June 24, 2020

^{iv} <https://www.wpr.org/all-lives-dont-matter-until-black-lives-matter-protests-expand-across-wisconsin-saturday>

^v Denison