

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth; open our eyes that we may see your kingdom; and open our hearts and minds that we may know the needs of our brothers and sisters who are hurting, hungry and dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

One of the great revolutions of the eighteenth century was a revival and renewal movement within the Church of England. At the center of that movement was an interesting character by the name of John Wesley. The foundation of Wesley's teaching is that faith must be lived out. He taught about grace; prevenient grace that urges us to God before we are even aware of God; justifying grace in which we receive pardon for our sins and sanctifying grace that leads to perfection in love. Now, perfection in Wesley's day and in this context does not mean without flaw, but it does mean maturity in the faith. So, when we Methodists talk about the idea of going on to perfection, we're talking about growing and maturing in our faith such that we become more like Jesus as the image of God within us becomes more prominent and our ego moves into its proper place.

In the beginning, the Methodist movement was designed as an accountability movement that encouraged the members to live holy lives. It was never intended by Wesley to become a church, it only became one, first in the United States because of the Revolutionary War. The organization of the movement consisted from largest to smallest, of societies, classes and bands. The society would be the largest group meeting, sort of like the congregation would be in the church. Next were the classes. These were

groups of 10-12 persons, male and female, that dealt with personal accountability in how you were growing in faith and living the Christian life. The class leader would collect a penny for the poor from each person at their meeting. The classes were subdivisions of the societies. Membership in the classes was open to seekers as well as persons who were already Christian. Every Methodist had to attend their class meeting or they would be expelled from membership – and yes, that did happen. If you didn't toe the line, you were gone. And, if you were in England during Wesley's lifetime, Wesley himself quite probably removed you. There were no goldbricks and no excuses. The third groups, the bands, were segregated by sex, consisted of 5-7 persons and took the whole concept of accountability and kicked it up a notch. Membership in the bands was not mandatory. That was the system that provided the structure for the Methodist movement to flourish and grow.

The cornerstone of the theology that Wesley shared was based upon the greatest commandment: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all of your mind, and with all your strength... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29-31, NRSV). It is a foundation of love, love of God and love of neighbor. And so, in the spirit of our belief about the nature of God, that the primary nature is love, Wesley set apart three rules of life that have precedence in Scripture. They are 1) Do No Harm, 2) Do Good, and 3) practice the spiritual disciplines. These three rules of life are known as the Rules of the General Societies, Bishop Reuben Job, the former publisher of the Upper Room, wrote a book about the General Rules that he called *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (you might notice this is the title for this series). Over the next 3 weeks, we will look at these rules in the light of our own faith and practice.

The first rule is “do no harm.”

I ask you this question, what does it mean to ‘do no harm’ in our world today?

What does it mean to do no harm in a culture that is so divided over political and social issues that it causes us who claim to follow Christ to actually harm the body with our pig headed determination to be right?

Well, for one thing, it means that we don’t use words to cause division and strife. It means that we respect other people even when we strongly disagree with them. It means that we don’t vilify someone else because we disagree with his or her politics or their faith commitment.

The hot button issue in United Methodist polity over the past few decades has been inclusion of LGBTQ individuals. The angst and division led to the called General Conference in February of this year. And that called General Conference led to the passing of what is known as the “traditional plan,” a series of changes to the Book of Discipline that double down on the penalties against clergy who officiate at gay weddings and serve to absolutely prohibit the candidacy and ordination of LGBTQ individuals. Now, you don’t want to get me started on how myopic these new rules are: rules that would permit me to possibly get by with a slap on the wrist for committing adultery, but that would suspend me without pay for a year on the first offense of officiating a gay wedding. So, we won’t go there. But I do want to point out that there are very committed Christians who hold scripture in high regard residing on both sides of this issue and there has been harm... harm for the LGBTQ community and their allies who have been condemned and vilified by some speaking on the floor of the General Conference as devils intent on perverting the Gospel and harm to those who

hold a traditional view of scripture who have been painted with a broad brush as being homophobic bigots. Neither characterization is correct. Both views have caused harm and division in the body.

Is this the kind of thing that Jesus meant for us to do when he said that the most important commandments are to love God and love neighbor? No! Spreading gossip and falsehoods about someone with whom we disagree is a sin. Period. For that matter, spreading gossip and falsehoods about anyone is a sin.

Doing no harm means treating people like we want to be treated. It means being good stewards of the earth that God gave us to manage, not to plunder.

Doing no harm means not taking advantage of another, it means treating them fairly, even if they are not treating us fairly.

Doing no harm means that we live our lives in a way that allows the image of God that resides in each one of us to shine through.

Doing no harm means that we look out for one another. It means that we treat one another with respect and dignity.

It means that we place our full faith and allegiance with Jesus Christ and not with some dogma or political ideology, or even some nation state.

It means full and complete dependence upon God in all of our thoughts, words, and deeds and it is something that can only be accomplished when we turn to God to inhabit our lives and transform us into beings solely dependent upon God.

Bishop Job writes that “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. As did John Wesley and those in the early Methodist movement before me, I too will determine every day that my life will always be invested in the effort to bring healing instead of hurt; wholeness instead of division; and harmony with the ways of Jesus rather than the ways of the world. When I commit myself to this way, I must see each person as a child of God – a recipient of love unearned, unlimited, and undeserved – just like myself. And it is this vision of every other person as the object of God's love and deep awareness that I too live in that loving presence that can hold me accountable to my commitment to do no harm" (Job, 31).

Perhaps the greatest consequence that comes about when we choose to live this rule of love and life that calls us to do no harm is that we are formed and transformed to live as Jesus lived. And this personal transformation can lead to the transformation of the world around us as well. As two people in a long and successful marriage begin to think, act, and even look like each other; perhaps those who practice this rule begin to think, act, and even look like Jesus. Doing no harm is a giant step toward living a holy life that brings healing and wholeness to all that it touches.

Do no harm. Do Good. Practice the Spiritual Disciplines.

Three simple rules of life that have changed the world. They did so in Wesley's day. They can do so again in ours if we will reclaim our Methodist heritage and live as God intends for us.

May we strive to make it so. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.