

Rule #3: Stay in Love with God

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 might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

For the past few weeks we have been taking a look at who we are and what it means to be Methodist. With all of the discussion and speculation about the future of the United Methodist Church, both within and without the organization, I felt that we could use a refresher course in Methodism, Methodism 101 if you will, to remind us who we are and, more importantly, whose we are. In our worship services surrounding Annual Conference, I talked to you about the Connexion and what it means when we United Methodists work together in the cause of living out the faith that we have been given. I showed you how we can accomplish greater things working together than we can accomplish working on our own. In the next couple of weeks as I head to Abingdon, Virginia to serve on the leadership team of the Upper Room's Five Day Academy for Spiritual Formation, our former District Superintendent, the Reverend Dr. Al Bowles will continue this theme next week with observations from his many years of ministry and Mike Feely will share with us the week after with another look at how we do ministry together.

That brings us back to this morning. Over the past couple of weeks, we have taken a look at John Wesley's General Rules of the United Societies, one of the documents that distinctly identify us as a people who combine both personal piety and social justice in our practice of a living faith that is called to make a difference in the world around us. There are three rules that stand at the heart of who we are as followers of Christ in the Wesleyan tradition.

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The first rule is this: Do no harm in word or thought or deed. Remembering that our words can cut someone to the quick, as the letter from James reminds us, the tongue can be “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8b, NRSV). So we are called to watch our tongues. But also our actions, and sometimes more importantly, our inaction in the face of injustice can cause harm and can even inflict harm in some cases. Either way, we are called to be cognizant of our actions and to actively seek to ideally cause *no* harm or, at least, to cause as little harm as possible in what we say and do.

The second rule is this: Do good in all the ways that we can to all the people that we can as long as we ever can. A rule that is seen in the actions described in Matthew 25:31-46 calling us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and prisoner... a reminder that what we do (or don't do) to “the least of these who are members of my family” we do (or don't do) to Jesus. It is a rule that reminds us of God's instruction in Micah 6:8 to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.”

That leads us to the last rule: Attend to the ordinances of God. At least, that is the 19th century language used by John Wesley to describe the third rule of life in the General Rules of the Methodist Societies. A rule of life that will make it easier to live into the first two rules. When Wesley instructs us to attend to the ordinances of God, he is telling us that we should not forsake public worship a together whenever we can, that we should engage in the spiritual disciplines of personal and family prayer, studying the scriptures in private and with other believers, by fasting and by taking the Lord's Supper as often as possible. When Bishop Reuben Job wrote *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Abingdon Press, 2007), he changed Wesley's language to “Stay in Love with God.”

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At the heart of the General Rules we find the call to live out the love of God and love of neighbor that is found in 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, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Through the active participation and practice of the spiritual disciplines we cultivate the relationship that we need with the living God that will permit us to be successful in our quest to live into the first two rules.

This call to stay in love with God is at the heart of who we are as Methodists, but more importantly, it is at the heart of who those of us who follow Christ as we relate to our Christian community and to the world around us. Through prayer, Bible study, and worship, we grow closer to the God of all creation, the God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is a calling that Jesus certainly knew and certainly demonstrated throughout his ministry. The connection between the Son and the Abba Father was strong. It was demonstrated as Jesus would go away for prayer and rest. It empowered the disciples and it will empower us to live into our faith.

The call to love is at the heart of our faith. It is through love of God and love of neighbor that we can become whole, moving on toward the perfection in love that is our goal. On the seashore at Galilee in the days after the Resurrection, Jesus asked Peter three times “Do you love me?” Three times Peter answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” And Jesus told him to “feed my sheep” or “feed my lambs” with every response. Jesus had this conversation with Peter knowing full well that when push came to shove and his life was in danger, Peter, and for that matter the rest of the Disciples, had denied even knowing Jesus.

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We are enticed to deny Jesus each and every day. And sometimes we deny Jesus with our actions even when we claim our devotion to him with our lips.

That's why this third rule is so important. When we worship together, when we study scripture together, when we pray together, and when we come to the table together for the Lord's Supper, we encounter the living God. And this God, the God of all creation, empowers us to live the faith that we claim. God strengthens us to stand up to the injustice in our world and advocate for those who have no advocate. God strengthens us to face the powers of this world and demand mercy for all persons. And God welcomes us and invites us to walk humbly with this God who gave up everything so that we might be in relationship with God.

This morning, we have a chance to meet God face to face. This meeting takes place at this table as we gather round to partake of the bread and wine representing the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We come, not of our own volition, but through the invitation of Jesus, the Christ, himself who invited us to take and eat of the bread and to take and drink of the cup. It is an invitation born and nurtured in the love of the God of all creation for God's creation.

It is an invitation to all people. You don't have to be members of the United Methodist Church, because it is not our table. You don't have to feel worthy, for none of us are worthy. Yet, we are invited anyway.

It is an invitation that reminds us that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And if Christ died for us while we were in rebellion against God, then who are we to deny his sacrifice and his invitation?

The invitation comes at a great price. Let us accept it and come in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.