

Three Simple Rules: Do No Harm
Message for North East United Methodist Church
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One Tuesday night, many years ago, Nate, Matthew, and I traveled with my pastor of visitation at Rock Hall UMC, John A, to Washington to watch the boys' first Hockey game.



We were up in the rafters overlooking the rink...looking down on the players as they battled back and forth across the ice. The crowd was energized, wanting the Capitals to demolish the other team. Every time there was a break-away, a huge hit, a bad call, a rush on the goal, the crowd got to their feet.

I was sitting next to Matthew and as the game got into the last minutes and then overtime, it became more intense...two armies battling it out below us...both wanting to win...Matthew was on the edge of his seat...all of us were...because what we wanted to see was this...



Matthew said to me, more than once, “I want to see a fight.” By the last period we were looking for any sign that someone was about to lose their cool...throw a punch...



As I thought about the experience this week in light of the message today, I couldn't help but think of God...up above us...looking down on our world...on you and I battling it out each day...



Except God isn't on the edge of His seat looking for someone to throw a punch...Instead of hoping a fight will break out...God is hoping love will break out...forgiveness will be thrown...grace will appear...a hand will be offered, pulling someone up...When a punch is thrown, God doesn't get excited and rise to His feet...instead God puts His head in His hands and cries...

I couldn't help but think how different it must be for God looking down on us...what goes through His mind...compared to what was going through our minds as we looked down on those players skating across the ice...

Instead of yelling, “Fight, fight, fight”...God yells to us, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart...and Love one another...As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*”

Jesus was asked, “*Of all the commandments, which one is the most important?*” Jesus responded, **Mark 12: 30-31**, “*The most important one is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these*” (NIV).

For John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, the Great Commandment superseded all others as “*a guide to the highest form of faithfulness.*” Wesley understood that everyone needs help to live a holy and good life in a world like ours. He often feared that converts to Christ would fail to practice their faith and would, in his words, become more a “*child of the devil*” than before their conversion. He understood that Christians could lose the power of God that translates into a Christ-like life—a way of holy living that is constantly reforming and renewing the individual and the community. Therefore, around 1739 Wesley outlined practices, “General Rules” and instructions...formed classes where men and women were held accountable and took steps to grow in and live out their faith.

Out of the Great Commandment came Three Simple Rules that guided these groups, guided the church, spurring individuals onward in their walk with Christ, challenging them to live holy lives, different from the world around them. These rules were:

- 1. Do No Harm**
- 2. Do Good**
- 3. Stay In Love With God**

Over the next three Sundays we will look at each of these rules in detail. How would our lives change if we were to live these rules out...if we were to live out the Great Commandment in each decision, each action? Would God see a very different picture as He looked down on us from above? Would it bring a smile to His heart?

The first of these Three Simple Rules is **Do No Harm**. Wesley’s rule, as recorded in the United Methodist Book of Discipline, states, “*It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence the desire of salvation by doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced.*”

Here are some of John Wesley’s examples of harm most generally practiced 270 years ago:

- Taking the name of God in vain.
- The profaning of the Lord’s day...
- Drunkenness: buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, except in cases of extreme necessity.
- Fighting, quarreling, brawling, brother going to law with brother; returning evil for evil, or railing for railing; the using many words in buying or selling.
- The giving or taking of things on usury...

- Buying or selling slaves
- Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation, particularly speaking evil of magistrates or of ministers
- Doing to others as we would not they should do unto us.
- The putting on of gold and costly apparel.
- Softness and needless self-indulgence.
- Laying up treasures upon earth.

But we don't have to turn to Wesley...let's look at our example, our Savior...Reuben P. Job writes that *"even a casual reading of the gospel suggests that Jesus taught and practiced a way of living that did no harm. His life, his way of life, and his teaching demonstrated so well this first simple rule."*

Christ is our example...our model...the one who hung on the cross between earth and sky and spoke to His tormentors, *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."* The Great Morning Star who forgave Peter even after he denied Him three times. The Resurrection and the Life who did not condemn the woman caught in adultery but offered her new life. The Good Shepherd who washed the disciples' feet, including the feet of Judas, His betrayer.

Do No Harm. Rueben P. Job writes, *"What would it mean if we took this first simple rule seriously? First of all, it would mean an examination of the way we live and practice our faith. And if this examination were thorough, it would surely lead to a change in the way we practice our faith."*

We would begin to look at how our words, our actions, have done harm to others? We would begin to be on guard so that our actions and even our silence will not add injury to another of God's children. We would ask ourselves, "Where do we need to lift up instead of tear down, encourage instead of discourage, love instead of hate, help instead of hinder?" We would work at bringing healing instead of hurt, wholeness instead of division.

Paul challenges us in **Colossians 3: 12-14 (NLT)**, *"Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony."*

Do No Harm.

In **Romans 13: 8-10 (NIV)**, *"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and*

whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

Do No Harm.

In Galatians 5: 13-15 (NLT), *"For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." But if you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another."*

Do No Harm

In following such a simple rule, we follow Jesus. We choose to examine our own behavior and see where we can be more Christ-like in our speech, our actions, our daily interactions. Everything changes. As Rueben P. Job writes, *"Each of us knows groups that are locked in conflict, sometimes over profound issues and sometimes over issues that are just plain silly. But the conflict is real, the divisions deep, and the consequences can often be devastating. If, however, all who are involved can agree to do no harm, the climate in which the conflict is going on is immediately changed. How is it changed? Well, if I am to do no harm, I can no longer gossip about the conflict. I can no longer speak disparagingly about those involved in the conflict. I can no longer manipulate the facts of the conflict. I can no longer diminish those who do not agree with me and must honor each as a child of God."*

Before one of his evening prayers each week, John Wesley would ask:

1. **Have I interested myself any farther in the affairs of others than love requires?**
2. **Have I mentioned the failing or fault of anyone when it was not necessary for their good, or the good of another?**
3. **Have I unnecessarily grieved any one by word or deed?**

What if we not only asked such questions at the end of each day, examining ourselves, our speech, and our action...but what if every morning we awoke and prayed, "God of love, mercy and justice, it's been said that "hurt people hurt people." I'm sad when others hurt me, but I'm also sad when I hurt others. Heal my hurting self, and transform me from the inside out. Teach me to want what you want, to love as you love, to do no harm. In the name of Jesus who did no harm to those who harmed him. Amen.

What if every time we said or thought "I want"...what if we would consider what would be different if we instead accepted what the other person wanted?

What if every time we either corrected or argued with someone, or wanted to correct or argue with someone...what if we asked what was so important that we would risk harming another in order to be right?

What if every time we began to judge another person, seeing where they are falling short...what if we instead saw the good in them, looked for how God was working through them?

What if when someone cuts us off in traffic and we want to curse them out, we think to ourselves, "Do No Harm"...when someone hurts us or puts us down and we want to hurt them back, we think, "Do No Harm"...when we come across a group in the church or at the grocery store gossiping about someone, we think, "Do No Harm"...when we have to choose between the television and playing with our children, "Do No Harm"...when we are angry or not getting along with our spouse, "Do No Harm"...when at the committee meeting a decision is made that we don't agree with, "Do No Harm"...when you want to let someone you don't like really have it, "Do No Harm"...when we think about the many people watching us as Christians to see if we truly walk the walk or do we just talk the talk, "Do No Harm...when we get ready to smoke that cigarette or go to that internet site, "Do No Harm" (for we can harm ourselves as well as others)...before any word comes out of our mouth, "Do No Harm"...before any action is taken or decision made, "Do No Harm"

What if? How would our lives change? How would our witness to the community and others change?

Jesus said, **Matthew 16: 24-25 (NKJV)**, *"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."*

Jesus' way is one of self-sacrifice...moving from a ME-centered universe to a God-centered universe...being more concerned about what God would want in the situation than what we want or desire...being more concerned about the child of God across the table from us than our own ego...We are called to deny ourselves...Paul goes even further saying that we are to, **Romans 12:10**, *"love one another and outdo each other in showing honor."*

Can you imagine all of us trying to "outdo" each other in loving others, in "doing no harm"?

What we are talking about here is extremely difficult? The rule is simple...living it is beyond hard...It is not for the faint of heart...Living this rule will change your life...will cause you to examine your speech, your actions, in light of Christ...

A Simple Rule...a Jesus-sized challenge...As I have repeated this rule to myself throughout the week, it has caused me to question many of my actions...to be more careful in my speech, to turn to God in confession for my many shortcomings and sin, where I have harmed others...It has been testing...humbling...

But in this task that lies ahead of us...living out this simple rule...Our God isn't simply sitting up above us like my boys and I were sitting up above the hockey rink...Our God isn't simply sitting

up above looking down on us like ants scurrying around, trying to survive, battling it out...Our God is alive and with us...Our God has sent His Holy Spirit to give us strength...to help us live out His commands...Our God is within us, willing to help us when we call on Him...Our help is in the Lord...

Let us, this week, wake each day and pray that God would help us “Do No Harm”...let us go through the day repeating this simple rule and seeing how it begins to transform our speech and our actions. As Reuben P. Job writes, *“Perhaps the greatest consequence of [living the first simple rule: Do No Harm] is that we are formed and transformed to live more and more as Jesus lived. And this personal transformation leads to 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, so those who practice this simple rule begin to think, act, and perhaps even look like Jesus.”* Amen.