

Three Simple Rules: Stay In Love With God

Message for North East United Methodist Church

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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For John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, the Great Commandment superseded all others as “*a guide to the highest form of faithfulness.*” Out of the Great Commandment came Wesley’s Three Simple Rules...

1. Do No Harm

2. Do Good

3. Stay In Love With God

Today, we look at the third of these simple rules, **Stay in Love With God**. 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 attending upon all the ordinances of God...***”

Bishop Rueban P. Job writes, “*Ordinance is a strange word to our ears. But to John Wesley, it was a word that described the practices that kept the relationship between God and humans vital, alive, and growing. He names:*

- ***Public Worship of God,***
- ***The Lord’s Supper,***
- ***Private and Family Prayer,***
- ***Searching the Scriptures,***
- ***Bible Study, and***

- ***Fasting***

as essential to a faithful life...we too must find our way of living and practicing those disciplines that will keep us in love with God—practices that will help keep us positioned in such a way that we may hear and be responsive to God’s slightest whisper of direction and receive God’s promised presence and power every day and in every situation. It is in these practices that we learn to hear and respond to God’s direction. It is in these practices that we learn to trust God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is in these practices that we learn of God’s love for us. It is where our love for God is nurtured and sustained. Incorporating these practices in our way of living will keep us in love with God and assure us of God’s love for us in this world and in the world to come.”

Now this third simple rule, “*Stay in Love with God,*” assumes that one is already IN LOVE with God. But as Rev. Kathleen McShane writes, “*I think it’s possible to be a regular church attender, to be a good person, to call yourself a Christian, act like a Christian, and still never really felt anything remotely like being in love with God.*” Her statement affirms the experience Henry Blackaby shared in his book Experiencing God, when one of his church members was having a very difficult time in his personal life and it boiled over at a church meeting. Blackaby asked this gentleman, “*Can you describe your relationship with God by sincerely saying, ‘I love You with all my heart’?*”

Blackaby writes, “*The strangest look came over his face. He said, ‘Nobody has ever asked me that. No, I could not describe my relationship with God that way. I could say I obey Him, I serve Him, I worship Him, and I fear Him. But I cannot say I love Him.*” Blackaby goes on to say, “*Everything in this man’s life was out of order because God’s basic purpose for his life was missing. God created us for a love relationship with Him. If you cannot describe your relationship with God by saying you love Him with all your being, you need to ask the Holy Spirit to bring you into that kind of relationship.*”

So how is it that we can spend our entire lives in the church...working for Christ...serving the church...going to meetings...reaching out to hurting people...worshipping and joining in prayer with other Christians...and not be madly in love with God?

As Rev. McShane writes, *“We miss it...we skim right over the first, the most important, the most life-changing thread in the stories that make up our tradition--which is that God is madly, passionately, furiously in love with us. With you. God is absolutely besotted with you, following you around until you notice him, offering to forgive every betrayal, willing to act like a fool for love of you.”*

Think about the stories you know from the Bible. Of the God who came looking for Adam and Eve after they had disobeyed the one rule they had been given (to not eat the fruit of that one tree), and then when their sin was uncovered, God made clothes for them so they would not feel ashamed. The story of the God who could not let go of the covenant he had made with the Israelites, who kept forgiving them no matter how many times those people complained, and worshiped golden calves, and whined that they wished they belonged to some other god.

We fail to understand the breadth and length of God’s amazing love for us...for us...

Think about the stories that Jesus told to give us a picture of who God is: God is a woman who enlists everyone she knows to help her find the one coin that got lost. God is a parent who is so crazy in love that he sacrifices every shred of his own dignity, running and lifting up his robes, to welcome home a child who only came back because he had spent all the money.

We fail to comprehend the heights God will go to have a relationship with us...with you & me...

And then Jesus went even farther...not only teaching us about the depth of God’s love but showing us the depth of God’s love...washing the disciples’ feet...bearing the cross...opening his hands for the nails...giving up His life.

1 John 4: 9-10, 19 (NIV) – *“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. We love because he first loved us.”*

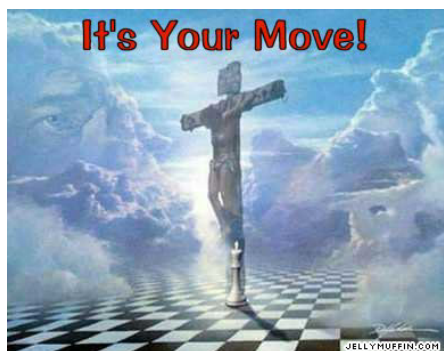
We fail to remember the sacrifice...the depths God will go to for us...

Paul prayed that we would not fail to understand, that we would not fail to comprehend, that we would not fail to remember...Paul writes in **Ephesians 3: 14-19 (NKJV)** – *“For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height- to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”*

This is a God who yearns, who longs, for friendship with you. For you to see how much you are loved...only for one reason: so that you might fall in love with God in response.

How could you not love back a God who loves you like that?

God has taken the initiative...offered us a love relationship...and now it is our move to embrace that relationship...to keep that relationship vital, alive, and growing...



Blackaby writes, *“I hear many people say, ‘I really struggle trying to have time alone with God.’ If that is a problem you face, let me suggest something: make the priority in your life to love Him with all your heart. That will solve most of your problem with your quiet time. **People who struggle to spend time with God don’t have a scheduling problem; they have a love problem.**”*

We certainly make time for those things we love...We find time for family, for our kids' sporting events, for hobbies, for the football game or Nascar race, for the American Legion or Elks Club, for vacations, for community activities...we find time for all the people we love, all the things we love to do and watch, all the organizations we love to be a part of...

Deb and I schedule our entire calendar around our boys...trying to go to as many lacrosse, baseball, soccer games as we can because we love them... I schedule date days and vacation with my wife because I love being away with her...I schedule hunting and even movies because I enjoy being in the woods and seeing the latest blockbuster...But how often do I schedule...put into my calendar...make an appointment with God?

“People who struggle to spend time with God don’t have a scheduling problem; they have a love problem.”

Have we truly accepted the invitation Christ is placing before us? Are we madly in love with the God who is madly in love with us? Are we doing everything we can to embrace the relationship offered to us in Christ? Are we meeting with God and spending time with Him, not in order to have a relationship but because we HAVE a relationship, because we are in love with our Creator? What are we doing to keep the relationship vital, alive, and growing?

God created the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, for a love relationship with Himself. After Adam and Eve sinned, they heard God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. They hid from Him because of their fear and shame. Can you sense the heart of a loving Father when He asked that wonderful love question, “Where are you?”

Perhaps at times we fail to meet God because we fail to understand, comprehend, or remember the depth of love God has shown us in Christ...but perhaps there are also times we know all too well how good God is to us and we recognize all too well how unworthy we are of that love...we feel the shame Adam & Eve felt after biting into the apple...and like them, we hide...

In his short story, “The Capitol of the World,” Ernest Hemingway tells the story of a Spanish father and his teenage son. The relationship between this father and son became strained and eventually shattered. When the rebellious son – whose name was Paco, a common Spanish name – ran away from home, his father began a long and arduous search to find him.

As a last resort, the exhausted father placed an ad in a Madrid newspaper, hoping that his son would see the ad and respond to it. The ad read, “*Dear Paco, Please meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. Love, Father.*” As Hemingway tells the story, the next day at noon, in front of the newspaper office, there were 800 Pacos, all seeking forgiveness from their fathers.

God is constantly putting an ad in the newspaper, sending out a letter, placing a message on people’s hearts, using our experiences to speak volumes, giving us a message through the Word, the messages preached on Sunday, the sacraments we receive at church – nudging us to look at the sunset - God is constantly saying to us, “*Please meet me...All is forgiven...Love, your Father.*”

When we don’t show up...when our relationship with God isn’t as it ought to be...God seeks us out...He cries to us, “Where are you?” A love relationship with God takes place between two persons...It is real and personal...God has spread His arms and reached out to you and me...God has poured His life into ours...And we, in turn...in love...pour our lives into His...As Blackaby writes, “*God is saying, ‘I want you to love Me above everything else. When you are in a relationship of love with Me, you have everything there is.’ To be loved by God is the highest relationship, the greatest achievement, and the noblest position in life.*”

After denying Christ three times, Peter met the resurrected Christ on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius. Jesus asked Peter three times, “*Do you love me?*” Bishop Job writes, “*The fact that Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him is a very revealing exchange. Peter denied Jesus three times, but here he declared his love three times. Peter was drawn toward a new beginning, a new future. The failures of the past are forgotten and the new possibilities are embraced... Each of us has our own litany of failures to recite, but the good news is that we can start*

again...The good news is that the past can be forgiven...The question to Peter becomes the question to each of us, 'Do you love me?'"

“Do you love me?” Jesus asks us. If the answer is, “Yes,” then we are going to work hard to do the things that will keep that relationship growing, that will help us “*Stay in Love With God.*” And we are going to do those things not because we have to, not in order to have a relationship with God, to earn His love...we are going to “show up” because we already have a relationship with God...we have heard and accepted His invitation...we understand, comprehend, and remember the breadth, length, height, and depth of His love...We don’t have a love problem...we are madly in love with the One who first loved us...

Three Simple Rules...

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

Are they really simple? No. Following Christ requires great sacrifice, self-examination, and commitment. Bishop Job writes, “*The rules are simple, but the way is not easy. Only those with great courage will attempt it, and only those with great faith will be able to walk this exciting and demanding way. There are many other options for us to choose, but they are all lesser options and lead to lesser results that range from poor to disastrous. The question from Jesus continues for each of us, 'My daughter, my son, do you love me?' And of course there is only one answer that we want to give, 'Yes Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.' The next question then becomes, are we ready to choose the costly way that involves these three simple rules as our way of living?*”

I often counsel with couples who are about to get married and I talk to them about the fact that love is not a feeling...love is a choice. We choose to love. There are many days I catch Deb walking around the house, picking up my dirty socks and being upset that I failed to follow

through on what I told her I would do, talking to herself, “I’m choosing to love...I’m choosing to love.” When we get married to someone, we choose to love them and stay committed to them, even when we don’t feel love toward them.

Roslyn Graham writes, *“Even before my husband and I had any kids, I had some days when I wondered if we would stay married. Of course I wanted to stay married, but I didn’t know how to resolve the problems that arose between us...we realized that we had decided to share our lives together because of our Feelings for each other, but those feelings were not powerful enough to keep our marriage strong. We needed more than that. It took some pondering, but we came to understand that our Actions would determine whether our little family would either grow - or be destroyed. We realized that what we decided to DO determined how we would Feel - not the other way around.*

This is a simple, but powerful concept. It is also something that I have to be reminded of over and over. Most people incorrectly think that we need to Feel like we are in love, before we express love to our spouse. That isn’t a problem when we are in the beginning of a relationship - we call it falling in love because we don’t recall that it took any effort or planning. The next stages of love, however, DO require something from us. That requirement is to make a choice. To “Choose to Love” our spouse.”

It is the same with our relationship with God...we must “choose” to love...we must “choose” to follow these Three Simple Rules to “Do No Harm,” “Do Good,” and “Stay In Love With God”...**we must “choose” to love** God with our whole heart and love our neighbor as ourselves...It is a choice...

There will be many times we go to God in prayer and feel nothing... many times we may not want to pray because we are angry with God or feel disconnected...there will be many times we don’t feel like loving another...many times we don’t have energy to “do good”...It is then we have a choice to make...We must “choose to love”...Joshua put this choice to the people of Israel, **Joshua 24: 15 (NIV)**, *“...choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”* Jesus put it this way, **Luke 9: 23 (NIV)**, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”*

Will we choose to live out these Three Simple Rules God puts before us? Will we choose to love God and others even when we don't feel like it? Will we follow the One who shouts from the heavens, "*Do You Love Me?*" Will we answer Him, not just with words, but with our lives, "*Yes Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you..*"