

The Method Sermon Series:
“DO NO HARM”

Galatians 5:16-26

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Galatians 5: 16 -26 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

At Trinity, we have people from many different religious backgrounds. And so I often get the question, “What does it mean to be a Methodist? What do Methodists believe?” Some people have addressed that question in a humorous way.

You might be United Methodist if:

- You have ever sipped grape juice out of a plastic shot glass during communion;
- You like to sing, except when confronted by a new hymn or a hymn with more than four stanzas;
- You accept the fact that the hymn “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” has almost as many stanzas as tongues;
- If you think that tithing means wearing a tie to church at least five or six times a year;
- Your Bible still has a cellophane wrapper on it;
- You hear something funny in a sermon and smile as loudly as you can;
- It’s 100 degrees outside with 90% humidity and you still drink coffee in Sunday School;
- It takes you ten minutes to say goodbye after church;
- You believe that it is OK to poke fun at yourself.

As United Methodist Christians, we always begin with the fact that we are a part of God’s larger family – one part of the universal church. We share a common faith with other Christians.

Methodism was not born out of some theological debate or schism. And for that reason, I suppose, we sometimes are accused of being wishy-washy about what we believe. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are very clear about our doctrines of grace and the meaning of salvation. We affirm the common faith of the church – such as belief in the Trinity, the mystery of salvation, the incarnation and Christ as Savior. But, our particular genius as one part of God’s family lies, not so much in doctrine, but in practice – in living the faith.

I mentioned in my article this past week, how it is we came to be called Methodist. It is a rather strange name that goes all the way back to our beginnings in the 1700’s in England. Methodism began on a college campus – not a likely place for a revival to break out. And it began with a college professor by the name of John Wesley. Wesley gathered around him a group of

students who sought to be more earnest in their Christian life. They did strange things, like meet together often for Bible study and prayer. They took Communion once a week. They gave a part of their money to the poor, and visited people in the local prison. Other students began to make fun of them by calling them “Bible moths” and “Methodists” because they were so methodical in their practice of faith. Methodist struck, and for that I am very thankful. Somehow Trinity Bible Moth Church doesn’t have a great ring to it!

Behind the name Methodist is the idea that there is some method to the Christian life. Christian faith is more than intellectual assent to doctrine, more than rites. The end product of faith is a life formed in obedience to Christ – loving as Christ loved. For us, creed and deed are inseparable. The Christian life is one of growing in maturity in Christ.

And this is where the method came in. As people were converted to Christ by Wesley, he joined them into small groups he called Societies. Wesley understood that in order to live a Christ-like life, we need help. And so to assist these new Christians in their journey, he outlined a set of General Rules. The “Rules” provided the method by which people could grow in Christ.

But there’s a problem here. At the mention of the word “rules” about half of you have already tuned out. Who wants more rules to take the fun out of life? Our kids wear T-shirts emblazoned with the words, “No Rules.” We urge them to push the limits; go where none has gone before. In subtle, and not so subtle, ways our culture tells us rules are made to be broken. The very idea of rules sounds so constricting; so limiting on our freedom to be our own person.

Often, in pre-marriage counseling, I talk with couples about the rules of their relationship. Every relationship has rules to it, though they are often unspoken. In fact, in order for there to be trust, there have to be rules.

When I asked one couple about some of their rules, the guy immediately bristled, “Rules! We don’t have any rules.” To him, rules meant restriction. “Well,” I said, “That’s too bad. I hope, for the sake of you relationship, that some of the rules you have are that: you will be faithful to each other, you will not lie to each other; you will not abuse each other; you will look for ways to build up and not tear down. If your relationship doesn’t have these rules, then there’s little chance that it will last.” “Oh, well, yea. We do all that. But we don’t have any rules,” he insisted. Well, call them what you may, their relationship had rules – ways of being together – or it would not survive and thrive.

C. K. Chesterton once said that, “If you walk to the edge of a cliff and keep walking, you will not break the law of gravity, you will prove it!” Rules don’t take away our freedom, they point us towards the ways in which we live that freedom most fully.

Lewis Smedes reminds us that, “Rules belong to life the way that scales belong to music, and the way grammar belongs to writing.” We cannot live a good life without rules, any more than we can make music without scales or write a story without grammar.

So back to Wesley’s rules. His intention was not to create a list of do’s and don’ts. These rules are meant to serve as a guide to relationship. If you want to live a relationship to God, and you want to be faithful to the way of Jesus, this is the way you do it. These are the building blocks of the Christian life.

They really boil down to three simple rules. If you want to grow in relationship to God, to become more like Christ: 1) Do no harm; 2) Do good; 3) Stay in love with God. Simple rules. But to follow them means that our lives will be transformed

Wesley's first rule of the Christian life is the first rule of medicine, do no harm. It is not complicated. It almost goes without saying.

One of the items making the news this week was the shocking story of six teenage girls attacking another 16-year-old girl, and beating her so severely that she suffered a concussion, as well as damage to her left eye and left ear, and numerous bruises.

The victim was lured to a home in Lakeland, Florida, and when she arrived, two girls started yelling at her. One girl began beating her and slamming her head into a wall until she fell unconscious. When she awoke on the couch, there were six girls in total, beating on her, laughing and urging each other on as they did so. All the while, they were video taping the attack just so they could post it on the Internet.

Do no harm, maybe it's not so obvious. Maybe it needs to be said.

In his letter to Galatians, Paul talks about living a life in the Spirit of Christ. In that passage he begins by listing some of those things that are the opposite of a life in the spirit. The list is not meant to be exhaustive, it is meant as an examples. These are the kinds of things that keep us *from* living in the Spirit of the Christ: impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, enmity, strife, anger, selfishness, dissention, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. Do no harm, avoid these kinds of things.

The items on Paul's list fall into three categories. First are things like impurity, drunkenness. The rule to do no harm means, first of all, to avoid those things that bring physical, emotional, spiritual harm to ourselves.

When our children are small, we try to teach them: don't play with fire, look both ways before you cross the street. Why? Because these are ways that can cause harm to themselves.

I didn't believe it when my mother warned me against playing with fire crackers. A boy in the neighborhood had some, so we decided to light them and set them off. We didn't have any matches, so we turned on the kitchen stove. I lit a firecracker and headed to the back door to throw it off the porch. I didn't make it. It blew up in my hand. And it hurt...big time!

Sometimes we have to learn the hard way. We would save ourselves a whole lot of grief and pain if we would simply follow the rule, do no harm. Don't blow up firecrackers in your hands. Don't do those things that are going to harm you.

Some of the other ways we harm ourselves are through hurtful attitudes about ourselves; telling ourselves we are no good, worthless, inadequate – low self-esteem. We can harm ourselves through substance addictions. We harm ourselves by not taking care of our bodies by overeating, lack of exercise.

Christian faith sometimes takes the rap for being negative – a religion of rules that takes the fun out of life. In reality, the instruction to do no harm puts the fun back into life. It saves us

from those destructive habits, attitudes and behaviors which can only bring harm to us.

In the same way to ourselves, we are enjoined to do no harm to others. Paul mentions things like enmity, strife, jealousy, anger. Of course, doing no harm to others means we don't beat them up – or cause them harm physically. But it goes further than that.

Bishop Reuben Job, reminds us that in our conflicts with other people, it radically alters the atmosphere if we would follow the rule to do no harm. It would mean that we could not longer diminish those with whom we disagree. We would have to guard our lips and hearts and minds so that our language would not injure or harm another child of God. We could not gossip about others. By simply doing this, we open the door for resolution and reconciliation. Doing no harm to others means that we will not be involved in activities that diminish or prevent them from knowing the fullness of life that God intends for all of us.

John Woolman was a Quaker who lived during the Colonial period of our nation's history. His journal is one of the classics of American religious literature. At age 23, his employer asked him to write a bill of sale for a slave. He told his employer that he thought slave-keeping was inconsistent with Christian faith. This started him on a journey in which he became a spokesman for abolition. On a personal level, he refused to use products of slavery. He wore un-dyed clothes because salves were used in making the dyes. He would not be served with silver plates or cups because slaves were made to dig these from the ground. Maybe that sounds extreme to us but Woolman's life was a testimony to integrity – to do all in his power to avoid bringing harm to others.

Paul also lists things like, party spirit and dissention. We are to avoid those things that bring harm to the social order. Living the spirit of Christ extends to the structures of our society, to issues of justice, fairness. We Methodists, for years, have had Committees on Social Concerns and a Social Creed, because we believe that the Gospel must be brought to bear on the world around us.

There was an example on 20/20 on Friday night with a segment on consumption. In a very graphic way, they showed how much we consume as individuals and the impact this has on our planet. If people in every nation of the world consumed at the rate we do in our country, it would take four planets the size of the earth to sustain us.

To do no harm means we need to examine the way we live and practice our faith. It means that we become pro-active in responding to all that is damaging of God's creation and is therefore destructive to us also. It means that we must be on guard so that my actions will not add injury to another of God's children or a part of God's creation. Every day will be an effort to bring healing instead of hurt, wholeness instead of division, harmony with the ways of Jesus, rather than the ways of the world.

Do no harm. Such a simple rule. But one that has the power to transform our lives after the example of Christ.