

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

August 24, 2008

Galatians 5: 13-15; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Do No Harm

As an introduction to the 3-week series of sermons I begin today, I turn to Bishop Reuben Job's own words in the preface to his book, Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living.

“We live in such a fast-paced, frenzied, and complex world that it is easy to believe we are all trapped into being someone we do not wish to be and living a life we do not desire to live. We long for some way to cut through the complexities and turbulence of everyday life. We search for a way to overcome the divisiveness that separates, disparages, disrespects, diminishes, and leaves us wounded and incomplete. We know deep within that the path we are on is not healthy or morally right and that it cannot lead to a positive ending. We fear there is no way out.....I believe we have reached a place where, as a people of faith, we are ready to give serious consideration to another way, a more faithful way of living as disciples of Jesus Christ. This way must be so clear that it can be taught and practiced by everyone. It must be accessible and inviting to young and old, rich and poor, powerful and weak, and those of every theological persuasion. It is a large order, but we already have in our hands the blueprint for this way of living. And with God's help and our willingness it can change our world. This way of living was given to John Wesley in a time much like our own. He took this blueprint, fleshed it out, taught it and practiced it. And now it has been passed on to us. Now it is up to us to see if we will take it, teach it, and practice it until it becomes our natural way of living – a way of living that will mark our life together and our lives as individual Christians.....I invite you to see if you are ready for this radical change of direction that is marked by these three simple rules:

1. Do No Harm
2. Do Good
3. Stay in Love with God

(Abingdon Press, 2007, pp.7-10).

As summer draws to a close and as we think about gearing up for another full year of church programs and activities, I want us to take us Bishop Job's invitation, and look at these three rules of living, and consider if and how we can put them into practice – individually and collectively – as individual Christians and as the Church of the Redeemer.

So today we begin with Rule #1: Do No Harm.

To back track just a bit however, we need to put these three rules into their original historical context. They were written for what were called the “United Societies,” those groups of people first in England and then in America who followed the preaching and teaching of John Wesley and the Methodist movement. The united societies were divided into smaller groups of about 12 each called classes, and the leader of these classes was responsible for overseeing the spiritual lives of each member, and to look for evidence in each person's life of the fruits of salvation. The General Rules as they were called were first published in 1743. So here's how Rule 1 reads in Wesley's publication, and how it still reads in the United Methodist Book of Discipline:

“It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their desire for salvation, First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced, such as:

The taking of the name of God in vain;

The profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein or by buying or selling;

Drunkenness;

Slaveholding;

Fighting, quarrelling, brawling, brother going to law with brother; returning evil for evil;

The buying or selling goods that have not paid the duty;

Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation;

Doing to others as we would not they should do unto us;

Doing what we know is not for the glory of God;

Softness and needless self-indulgence;

Laying up treasures upon earth;
 Borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability
 of paying for them

(The Book of Discipline, 2004, Par. 103; pp. 72-73).

Wesley's language and examples may sound and seem quaint to us, but I think we can still get the idea, can't we? Doing no harm isn't that hard or complicated to understand. That's why Reuben Job calls it a "Simple Rule" -- it's understandable, it's doable. But listen, he doesn't call it an easy rule. Do No Harm isn't a rule that necessarily comes easily or always naturally to us. Seeking revenge. Speaking before thinking. A tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye. Getting what we deserve. Climbing the ladder of success. Exercising our own rights. Winning at all costs. Such ways of understanding and such ways of living are more common than "doing no harm." Whether it's in the sphere of politics or economics or criminal justice or food growth and distribution or environmental policy or civil rights, "doing no harm" is seldom the first rule of action. Harmfulness abounds it seems. Warfare. Political and economic and social and religious oppression. Inequities of every kind. Someone somewhere is always being harmed. Even on smaller or closer to home scales, harm is done: domestic violence, hate talk and hate crimes, racial profiling, job and housing and educational discrimination, predatory lending, home foreclosures, child-endangerment, and so on.

The list is long. Doing harm happens in all kinds of ways, by pretty much everyone, in all kinds of situations. From the outright taking of another's life to the more subtle harm of causing another's embarrassment or humiliation. Legally and illegally harm is done. Intentionally and unintentionally harm is done. Through governmental policies, and through our own personal words and actions, harm is done.

So it may seem impossible, this first rule of a Wesleyan way of living. What would it mean for us "to do no harm?" Can we do no harm?

This imperative shows up in a number of other settings and disciplines. There's the practice of medicine, example. And while I learned that most of the experts are sure that the 4th century B.C. Greek physician Hippocrates did not include the exact phrase,

“first do no harm” in his famous oath, they do say that his writing “Epidemics,” does contain the phrase. In the words of Hippocrates, “The physician must be able to tell the antecedents, know the present, and foretell the future – must mediate these things, and have two special objects in view with regard to disease, namely to do good or to do no harm.” But as those of you here who practice medicine know all too well, “to do no harm” raises a number of questions. Cancer treatments. Medical research. Lethal injection as a means of capital punishment. Euthanasia. Abortion. What does it mean for physicians to “do no harm?”

In his Business Week column, Bruce Weinstein, known as “the ethics guy”, lists what he calls five easy principles to govern all behavior. Guess what the first one is? “Do no harm.” How could such a principle guide the business world? Lay-offs. Buy-outs. Insider trading. Would such stories still be front-page news?

A “Do No Harm Project” was begun in 1994, and as the description of the project summarizes, it “seeks to identify the way in which international humanitarian and/or development assistance given in conflict settings may be provided so that, rather than exacerbating and worsening the conflict, it helps local people disengage from fighting and develop systems for settling the problems which prompt conflict within their societies.”

Or how about this? The ‘Do No Harm’ movement itself? It’s a non-profit non-organization started by a couple of people whose only purpose is to spread the message and to get others “to do no harm.” You can order free “Do No Harm” stuff from their website: www.donoharm.us. Here’s what their home-page says, “What does ‘do no harm’ mean? Ultimately it means to give thoughtful consideration to our actions. ‘Do no harm’ simply means to consider how our actions may affect the world we all share, to be compassionate in our dealings with all creatures, and not to thoughtlessly despoil our planet.”

So obviously neither John Wesley nor Reuben Job, nor any of us either, has a patent on the rule to “do no harm.” The expression has widespread use and understanding.

Reuben Job sets this first rule mostly within the context of conflict. Here's what he says:

“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 diminish those who do not agree with me and must honor each as a child of God. I will guard my lips, my mind, and my heart so that my language will not disparage, injure or wound another child of God. I must do no harm, even while I seek a common good”(p.22).

What did Paul write to his churches?

“...the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear....Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

So now what?

I realize that I probably am not going to have much direct influence in my life on how stock-brokers treat the employees of the companies they own, or how relief aid is distributed in war-torn countries, or how those without adequate financial resources receive decent health care and fair legal representation. A whole lot of harmful stuff is going on and will continue to go in our world. I can do whatever I can of course to be an advocate of change in the world, and to support those persons and those causes which

have more direct influence than I. I do, however, have direct influence on my own words and actions, in my own family, here with those of you I worship and work with, and with the people from our community who come to this church for help, for healing, for prayer, for comfort. I do have direct influence on how this church keeps its doors open to all and welcomes and receives all. I do have influence on how I spend my own money, and how we use the money that comes through this church. And so do you. Our words, our actions, the decisions we make, the climate we create, the way we treat each other and those around us, what we teach, how we share -- are all ways that can cause harm or not. Choosing to do no harm, therefore, makes a difference -- to each of us in our own lives, and to us as a church. A church that struggles and strives to do no harm -- well, that's the kind of church I want to be part of, and that's the kind of church we can choose to be.

So look around at each other for a bit. Now, in your own mind and heart, think of those with whom you disagree or have had some kind of difficulty. Think of those who feel part of things here and those who feel on the edges. Think of those who aren't here -- think of those in this community who have been excluded by or looked down on or outright rejected by others. What can you do? Will you, at least, make a promise to yourself to do no harm? And if you make this promise and those next to you do the same -- what will happen? What could happen?

How about if we just do it -- and find out?

May the words of our mouths, and the thoughts of our minds, and the actions of our hands, and the motives of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, and may they bring no harm to any of your people. Amen.