

Three Simple Rules: Show Up

Hebrews 10:19-25
Matthew 26:26-30

September 6, 2026 / Communion Sunday

This is the third sermon in my series about John Wesley's General Rules for the United Societies. Catchy title, I know. It has also turned into a series about our Wesleyan identity. Some of you were raised in other churches and have not heard some of the stories about our past. Some of you were raised in the UMC and have heard these stories before. You have told me after these sermons that you appreciate the refresher. As we wrap up this series, let's explore a little more.

As you recall, the series is centered on the founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley. Wesley was a pastor in the Church of England and felt called by the Holy Spirit to lead a reform movement. He was not rebelling against a theological teaching of the church. He wasn't trying to change its bureaucracy or structure. Wesley's movement was centered on zeal. He wanted to see members of the church live into their faith more fully.

He traveled the country preaching to crowds and filling people with the Holy Spirit. These people needed a way to live into that transformation in their daily lives. Wesley borrowed some ideas from other Protestant movements and organized these Methodists into accountability groups – bands, classes, and societies. Suddenly, thousands of people across England began meeting regularly under the Methodist name. Realizing he couldn't supervise them personally, Wesley decided to give them some guidelines.

He called these his "General Rules for the United Societies," what we now call the General Rules of the United Methodist Church. It mapped out the structure of the groups and then it gave broad theological advice. Wesley said that members of the groups were to first do no harm, then do good, and finally attend to the ordinances of God. These rules are the genesis of this sermon series, and we have explored each one in turn these past few Sundays.

I began with Wesley's first rule, "First, do no harm." That is harder than it first appears. Wesley reminds us that we do not start our faith journey at a "net zero," and then move into the positive with good deeds. Instead, many of us discover, through our encounter with the gospel, that we are intentionally or unintentionally doing harm. The first step is to repent of that harm. Wesley was uncompromising in his view of harm. He was a pioneer of the concept of divestment. It was not enough that his followers avoided buying, selling, or owning enslaved people, they also could not trade with companies that did or buy products harvested with slave labor. In our vastly interconnected and information rich society, it can be a real challenge to live into Wesley's instruction to, "do no harm."

Last week, we talked about Wesley's instruction to, "do good." Like most Christians, Wesley believed that we are saved not by works, but by our faith in Jesus Christ. Grace is a free gift, available to all without price. However, Wesley recognized that, as James says, faith without works is dead. He discovered that faith and works are mutually reinforcing. Our faith inspires us to do good and the good we do strengthens and restores our faith. Asking which is more important is like asking which do you prefer, breathing out or breathing in? He encouraged his followers to live into a balance between belief and works to develop a stronger faith.

This week, we tackle Wesley's third rule: attend to the ordinances of God. As I mentioned earlier in the series, in the early 2000s, a United Methodist bishop named Reuben P. Job used these general rules as the basis for a devotional text called, "Three Simple Rules." It became wildly popular in United Methodist circles and, as I understand it, members of this church have even used it as part of a small group study. Job kept Wesley's first two rules, "do no harm, do

good,” but didn’t like the wording of the third. He changed, “attend to the ordinances of God,” to “stay in love with God.” I understand the impulse to make the phrase more memorable, but I don’t think Job’s phrasing really captures the heart of Wesley’s message. I want to tell you some stories that will reveal what I think Wesley meant and then I’m going to challenge you to come up with your own phrase to capture that meaning.

John Wesley spent most of his preaching career traveling throughout Great Britain. However, in his earlier years, he visited what we now call the United States. Wesley traveled to the Georgia colony as a pastor and missionary called to preach to the local English settlers and to conduct outreach to the local Native American population. Most historians agree that it did not go well. Wesley was still very committed to a strict, rigid, methodical, and uncompromising view of faith life. He would try to catch people not in church or not praying. He was not very popular. By the time he returned to England, Wesley was having a full-on crisis of faith.

One of his experiences especially unnerved him. On the journey to Georgia, Wesley experienced a terrible storm on the North Atlantic. He and the other English settlers on board were gripped with fear, certain the boat would be lost in the storm. However, the same ship held a party of Moravians – German speaking Christians from Central Europe. I’m sure they were afraid, too, but it didn’t control them in the way it did Wesley and the English. They weathered the storm praying and singing hymns together. Wesley was convicted. He believed in the right things. He was doing the right things. He did not feel it. It was not personal. He had religion, but he did not have faith.

When Wesley returned to England, he was ready to abandon his pastoral career entirely. He spoke with a Moravian minister he knew named Peter Bohler. He explained that, when he preached in church, when he prayed, he felt nothing. He asked Peter if he should walk away. Peter gave some unusual advice: fake it, ‘til you make it. In reality he said, “preach faith, until you have faith.” That’s a little unexpected. I would think he’d tell Wesley to take a break, go on a retreat, or find himself. Instead, he told Wesley to keep going. And so, Wesley did.

One night, Wesley went to attend a Bible study at a building on Aldersgate Street in London. He was listening as the leader read aloud from a passage from Luther’s preface to Romans. There was something in the way Luther described God’s grace that suddenly broke through to Wesley. He felt it. He had a real experience of God’s grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit. In his journal, he wrote that he felt he was “strangely warmed.” I’ve always felt that would be a great name for a Methodist chili cook-off: strangely warmed. It was a transformative experience for Wesley. The rest of his life became about inspiring that kind of experience in others, and then giving them the structure to live into it, including the three simple rules we know and love.

So, this is the message behind, “attend to the ordinances of God.” It is the message that Peter Bohler gave to Wesley and that Wesley gives to us. When you are struggling to feel close to God, don’t forget to go to the places where God has promised to show up. God is with us always and everywhere, but in scripture and church tradition, we have identified places where God is uniquely present. Seek God where God has promised to be found.

God has promised to be found in the time we spend together. Our reading from Hebrews today says, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Meeting together for worship, for Bible study, for fellowship is a core component of our faith. Jesus promised that, where two or more gather in His name, he will be with them. Paul says, “do not give up meeting together.” That is an ordinance of God. Attend to that ordinance.

We see it most of all in communion. In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we heard how, on his last night with his disciples, Jesus instituted the Lord's supper. He broke bread with his disciples. He lifted the cup with his disciples. He told them to do this for the rest of their lives and to teach their children to do it, too. He made a promise to them that, even after his death and resurrection, when they share this meal, he will be as present with them then as he was at that last supper. We still celebrate that meal because, as Christians, as Methodists, we seek God where God has promised to be found. God has promised to be found in communion.

One of my seminary professors told this story. She was in grad school and on a rotation of folks who helped with chapel time. She has a lifelong history of depression and was in a depressive state at that moment. It didn't help that she was also getting over an illness. The last thing she wanted to do was participate in worship, but she had promised. She pulled herself out of bed and made her way to the chapel. Then, she realized it was a communion service. So, on top of being in a place she didn't want to be, surrounded by people she didn't want to see, she was going to have to drag herself to the front of the church, with unkempt hair and dirty clothes for communion. She went and, when she reached out to take the elements, she had a transformative experience of God. She realized in that moment that God was ready to receive her, even when she was not ready to receive God. Like Wesley, her heart was strangely warmed. Reluctantly, she made her way to a place where God has promised to be found and, unexpectedly, she found God there, waiting for her.

I do want to pause and note that her depression was not miraculously cured. I'm not suggesting that communion cures mental health issues. She was very frank with us that she has benefitted from the support of mental health professionals and medication in her journey. This was one powerful and helpful moment along that road. I'm also not saying that this will happen every time you take communion, or even most times. What I am saying is that it did happen once. When we show up to these places where God has promised to be found, ready or not, we sometimes find God. That's what Peter Bohler told John Wesley. Keep going and faith will find you. That's what Wesley told us. Attend to these ordinances of God: worship, communion, scriptural study, holy conferencing, prayer; because God has promised to be there. Stay in love with God just doesn't quite capture it. Wesley's advice is for those struggling to find the love of God as much as for those trying to keep it. How would you phrase it? What would your version of the third rule be? E-mail me or post it on the comments for the livestream. That's your homework for this week.

So, what is this series all about? What is a United Methodist? Who are we? We are people who believe in repentance. We are people committed to first, do no harm. That takes research, introspection, and discipline, but it is the first step in becoming who we are called to be. We are people committed to doing good. We do good not because we believe we can earn salvation. Grace is a free gift for all. We do good because we know that faith and works are two sides of the same coin. They are as connected as breathing out and breathing in, and we spend our whole lives finding balance in those two. Finally, we are people who show up. We show up when we feel like and when we don't. When we are ready to experience God and when we are not ready. We seek God in the places where God has promised to be found because – every once in a while -- God surprises us there. We're Methodists. Once in a while, we find ourselves strangely warmed. **Amen.**