

First Do No Harm

A Sermon by Pastor Harlen Rife

Isaiah 42:1-4
Romans 13:8-10

August 23, 2026

Scriptures:

Isaiah 42:1-4

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
2 He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
3 A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
4 he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope."

Romans 13:8-10

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.

Recently, my friend Gabe found himself church shopping. He was not raised in a religious household but recently had a spiritual awakening of sorts. He lives in the Columbus area and was trying out local congregations to see if he could find a good fit. One Sunday, he reported to me that he was trying a local United Methodist Church. I immediately began brainstorming ideas for how best to tease that pastor. What lines could I feed Gabe to say that would really get him or her going? I even turned to my UMC clergy group chat for ideas.

We suggested that he stand near the pastor and say something like, "I am looking for a church that is part of some kind of connectional system. I think it would be great if pastors were itinerant." Or perhaps he could say something like, "my last church used wine for communion, but I'm really looking for a place that uses grape juice." He could say, "I'm struggling to make spiritual decisions. I wish there were some kind of useful quadrilateral that would help me discern God's will for my life." Methodists famously turn to the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in such moments. My personal favorite was, "churches have so many complicated teachings. I wish there was a church with three simple rules that could guide me in the practice of my faith!" Unfortunately, he got sick and watched the service online so I didn't get to make my mischief!

That last point about the “Three Simple Rules,” is the basis for this mini sermon series. They point back to an important moment in the history of the Methodist movement. If you remember, John Wesley was one of the pastors swept up in a great religious awakening in England. He was captivated by the idea that faith should not just be confined to Sunday morning worship. He encouraged his followers to practice what they preached and live their faith every day. He organized people into groups, bands, and societies that met throughout the week for Bible study, prayer, discernment, good works, and mutual accountability. As those groups grew and expanded beyond what Wesley could personally supervise, it became clear they needed some guidelines to help them. To that end, Wesley offered his, “General Rules for the United Societies. Today, we know them as the General Rules of the United Methodist Church.

The General Rules give the structure for the classes and societies that made up the movement. They encouraged members to these meeting in addition to weekly worship to foster their spiritual development. Following these logistics, Wesley offers three rules that should guide the faith life of any Methodist. Broadly speaking, those rules are to do no harm, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God. In 2007, UMC Bishop Reuben P. Job attempted to recapture that spirit when he published a book entitled *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*. He felt that third rule, “attend to the ordnances of God,” wasn’t very catchy so he amended the title to, “stay in love with God.” If you are a long-time member of the UMC, you probably have heard them presented that way: Do No Harm, Do Good, Stay in Love with God. That book is incredibly popular in Methodist circles. Now imagine you’re the pastor of a Columbus area church and a stranger walks in saying, “gee, I wish you just had three simple rules...”

The first thing to know about these rules is that, like everything Wesley wrote, they are rooted in scripture. Our rule for today is “First Do No Harm.” Our reading from Romans today declares that all the rules of the church are really summed up to this one idea: love your neighbor. And Paul adds, “Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.” It’s interesting to tease out the connection here. Jesus famously said that the two great commandments are to love God with all your heart, and all your strength, and all your mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself. What does it mean to love your neighbor. We often interpret that passage to mean doing good to them. That is part of it, and in fact our topic for next week. However, both Paul in his letter to the Romans and John Wesley warn that before we can even get to that, we have to stop doing harm to them. It’s a painful reminder that, often, we’re not starting our faith journey at a net zero. We’re starting in a deficit. We are farther from our goal than we realize.

If you go around Bishop Job and go right to Wesley, you get an idea of what he’s talking about. In the General Rules, Wesley offers a long list of the kind of harms he felt were a sticking point for the Methodist movement. There are many that you would expect including: taking the name of God in vain, profaning the sabbath, drunkenness, brawling, reading books or listening to songs that do not tend to the knowledge or love of God, and doing to others as we would not they should do unto us. There might be a few there that sting a bit. I enjoy sci-fi and action movies that might not tend toward the knowledge or love of God. I work on Sundays and sometimes violate my alternate sabbath. I agree with them in general, but my praxis isn’t always up to snuff.

There are other things on the list that are much more surprising and, frankly, much more difficult. Wesley said that we cannot say we, “do no harm,” if we carry on with these activities: buying or selling spiritous liquors, buying or selling slaves, taking a brother to court, buying or selling goods without paying the tax, giving or taking things on usury – unlawful interest, borrowing what you are unlikely to repay, putting on of gold or costly apparel, and laying up treasure upon earth. I don’t know about you, but some of those sting a little bit. I know I lay up treasures for myself on earth. I have investments, retirement accounts, and more material possessions than I truly need. If our recent move taught me anything it taught me that! I do buy costly things. Sometimes I buy clothes or jewelry because of the impression they make on others. Wesley would remind me that anything above what I need for ordinary subsistence is truly borrowed from the poor. It gets even more difficult when you know about Wesley’s story.

Rev. Wesley was pleasantly surprised by the rapid growth of his reform movement. His preaching drew many people to faith and his teachings situated them in Methodist societies where they could learn, grow, and do good. However, like many who experience that kind of rapid growth, he had a great fear. He worried that his message would be diluted in all these local settings. He could be more strict and have a smaller, purer movement. Or, he could be less strict and have a broader movement, but one with a confused or watered-down message. That debate came to a head with the growing Methodist presence in Bristol, England.

Bristol is a port city. In the eighteenth century, the city grew rich from participation in the notorious triangle trade. Ships from Britain carried manufactured goods to Africa. They were exchanged there for enslaved human beings. Ships then carried their human cargo across the notorious middle passage to North America and the Caribbean. They traded human lives for plantation goods like sugar, tobacco, and rum. They brought them back to Britain and sold them to the people there. It was a powerful economic engine because ships could make money on every leg of the journey. It was an engine fueled by human suffering.

John Wesley was famously opposed to slavery. As you saw, he banned buying, selling, and owning enslaved people in his general rules. However, in his heart, he knew this didn’t go far enough. He was invited to speak to the growing Methodist society in Bristol. This community brought in many new people and it connected the movement with the kind of wealth and resources that could really help it grow. Wesley could have shied away from controversy for the sake of growth. Instead, he declared that simply not owning your fellow human beings was not good enough. Christians should not do business with those who do. They should not invest in companies engaged in the slave trade. They should not sell supplies to slave ships. They should not buy commodities like tobacco and rum that were helping to fuel the triangle trade. Wesley pioneered the idea of divestment. You cannot say you “do no harm,” if you are trading with and funding people who do. You can’t say you “do no harm,” when you are profiting from human suffering. “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.” The folks in Bristol were not pleased, but Wesley held to his beliefs.

The frustrating part of this teaching is that we often do harm without knowing it. We don’t hire workers at starvation wages, but we might accidentally buy from a company that does. Personally, we might carefully separate our trash and recycling and limit our carbon footprint. At the same time,

we might hold investments in firms that are threatening our children's futures. We might at one moment condemn the proposed data center in our area while at another we stream videos and submit the AI prompts that make it profitable. Sometimes, we don't even realize we're doing. I've had church members complain about how nobody honors the sabbath anymore while they eat lunch in a restaurant after church! Don't get me wrong, I love a good Sunday brunch, but let's not blame the workers who cook it for us for failing to go to church!

There is a profound warning in both our reading today from Romans and John Wesley's General Rules. The challenge to, "do no harm," is so difficult that it deserves our first attention. We can't jump over, "do no harm," and launch right into "do good," without courting hypocrisy. Methodists, Christians really, should avoid helping with one hand and hurting with the other. Of the two, doing no harm requires a lot more introspection. You have to do the work, listen to the criticism, be teachable. You have to be willing to repent. That's a hard thing to do. It is hard to admit when we have hurt others – knowingly or unknowingly. However, it's the very heart of our faith. We serve a God of grace. We can acknowledge our sins knowing they will not be held against us. That gives us the confidence to face them and to choose to live differently.

So, here's my challenge to you in the week ahead. Try to identify one place in your life where you might be doing harm. Is there any place in your daily existence where, through action or inaction, you are making life more difficult for a neighbor? Make a change. The great lesson of John Wesley, the message he sought to impart to his movement, was that worship is only meaningful if it changes us for the better. The quality of this service, this sermon, is not measured in how well it kept your attention, how smoothly the slides transitioned, or if I kept it to a nice, tight, twenty minutes. The measure of this service will be if it made you a slightly different person. Did it help you grow a little closer to God and a little closer to your neighbor?

So, that's my challenge to you. Find one way to change for the better this week. I'll leave you with one practice I have adopted in my faith journey to help me. Sometimes a friend will constructively point out a place where I am doing harm. You're saying this and I don't think you realize how it offends people like me. You're doing this and I'm not sure you realize the impact it has on our planet. There is always the initial temptation to get defensive – to try and dismiss their concerns out of hand. Instead, I think about the words of our psalm reading today. What is the spirit I want to adopt? It's this:

"He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth."

Listen. Be gentle. And above all, do no harm. **Amen.**