

3 simple rules, yet 3 profound rules. 3 rules that can change our lives and change the world. In 1739 some people came to John Wesley seeking spiritual direction. He reserved sometime for them to talk and as time went on others began to join the conversation. Out of that came what is now known as the early methodist societies. There were 3 rules to belong to that group. The first rule; do. No. harm. The second rule. Do. good. The third rule - attend all the ordinance of God or as the late bishop Rueben Job paraphrased "stay in love with God" there is a conversation going on all across our denomination about how we need to reclaim our Wesleyan believes, return to our roots, especially as such these 3 simple rules.

Because as you can surely see we are living in a time of unprecedented change in culture and global affairs. So often we are locked in contentious debates about moral issues and so we need some rules. Not a whole lot of rules, some good rules, a few rules, rules that can serve as a moral compass for us. Point us in the right direction to go. The first rule, do no harm, we will take a look at that today. What does it mean to do no harm? Well let me define that for you. To do no harm means I will be on guard so that all my actions and even my silence will not add injury to another of God's children or any part of God's creation. Let me say that again because this is worth repeating. To do no harm means i will be on guard so that all my actions and even my silence will not add injury to another of God's children or any part of God's creation. Now I think that of all 3 rules this is the hardest rule. I think this is the hardest rule because of the multitude of ways in which we can cause harm, I'll illustrate just a couple through a few stories.

The first is a story from someone I heard who is a part of the network of biblical storytellers, he was telling a story of when he was a child and he went to go visit his grandparents house and he loved them and he especially loved his grandfather and he always wanted to please his grandfather and on this particular trip he overheard his grandfather say "I wish that was my yard was cut, it's overgrown with weeds, oh Lord whatever will I do, I wish I had cut it." Without saying anything the young boy slipped out the back, found the lawn mower, started it, and started mowing.

Now, he had never done this before. So he mowed, and he mowed, and he mowed. The weeds, the grass, the flowers, and the garden. He was so proud of himself because he loved his grandfather and he came back in the house with a big smile on his face and he overheard a conversation in the kitchen that went something like this: "Pierre you be careful what you are getting ready to say to your grandson because whatever you say to him he will remember for the rest of his life." Shortly thereafter his grandfather came in the room with his arms wide open and a big ol' smile on his face and said "oh sonny boy you have surprised me, you have mowed and mowed and mowed completely because you love your grandpappy and I love you." he reached

down and hugged his grandson and he felt a little tear drop on his shoulder from his grandfather.

We can cause harm by the words we use, the psalmist says in Psalm 141:3 “set a watch over my mouth and a guard over my lips.” We also can cause harm when we fail to be gentle with persons who are weak in the faith, who are struggling with the faith or yet to come to faith. And that reminds me of this story: Debra Hersh is a part of a commune in Australia, and she is part of a group of people who do what we all do in our wilder more embarrassing years experimenting, having fun, and for whatever reason on this particular occasion this group decided to attend a church because perhaps there was something there for them. So Debra and her friends walked into the church wearing not their Sunday best with hair frizzy, spiked, and colored and sat down in the pew. It was a small church and the ushers came running to the pastor saying what are we do with these people that just came in; they are different, long hair, beads, Lord knows what they are smoking. The pastor said let’s gather for prayer so the deacons and ushers and pastor gathered for prayer and the pastor said do you know what the Lord shared with me? The Lord shared with me that we are to be gentle because these are his precious little lambs. The church began to welcome them, surround them with love, accept them and over time Debra came to accept Jesus and now she travels the world with her husband as a missionary in the church. We can cause harm when we fail to be gentle with people outside of the faith.

We can also cause harm through uncharitable conversation and John Wesley had a lot to say about uncharitable conversations - such as gossip, unkind remarks. You know, from time to time I wish I could go back to middle school but then I hear what middle school is like and I don’t want to go back there. You know what they have to deal with? They have to deal with uncharitable conversations - gossip, derogatory remarks, bullying. And that’s hard. It hurts. But in the adult world walk into any place of business and you will find a culture of “in order for me to get ahead I need to find a way to put you down.” I mean just look at what political campaigns have turned into. I don’t even know what the candidates stand for at this point because every ad I see is just how bad this person is or that person is or what that person said on the toilet trying to push out a painful poop. We can do harm through uncharitable conversations. Did your mother ever tell you this - if you can’t say anything nice about anyone don’t say anything at all? (pause) how can you aren’t saying anything about me? (smirk) It’s so true isn’t it? We can cause harm in so many different ways.

Back in John Wesley’s day society was caught up in a web of evil. One of those evils was slavery and we can cause harm when we either actively participate or silent consent to a practice that is wrong or a system that is unjust. So the early Methodists galvanized themselves and a whole movement was started with the aim of abolishing

slavery because it caused harm. Now there are other things we can find ourselves caught up in, it's just a part of life, all forms of webs of deceit and harmful practices that we need to resist. And then of course we can cause harm to creation. Every year in early October I study the life of St. Francis of Assisi because it is such an inspirational life. He saw all of creation, the stars, the moon, the plants, the trees, and of course the animals as part of God's perfect creation. He had a special kindness for the animals. That's one of the reasons the United Methodist Church has a service known as the blessing of the animals in early October to honor St. Francis.

Well on one particular occasion I was really getting into this whole being nice to the animals thing. Really. I was driving along in my car and the route I come in on to get to church is pretty fast backroads, 50mph or so. I lean more towards the "or so" part of that. But I'm driving and right in front me of there is this turtle right in the middle of the road! I thought to myself "someone is going to run over this turtle!" So I pulled off the side of the road, I picked up this turtle, I carried this turtle to the other side of the road. I place it down, get back in my car and I start feeling pretty good about myself knowing when it turns into a teenage mutant turtle it'll repay the kindness some day when I start to worry and thought "gee, I hope I put him on the right side of the road." We can do harm even when we think we are not doing harm. There are so many different ways that we can cause harm.

I think the way I cause harm the most is by a simple little habit of mine. I move too fast, and by not being fully present when I finally do stop. I fail to recognize the people around me. Peoples of significant worth and value to God. I fail to make eye contact. Fail to recognize that every person I meet could be carrying a heavy burden. Perhaps some of you today. Every person has a hurt and yet I move so fast and I don't... slow... down.... To... see... another.... Of... God's.... children. And when I finally do, my heads thinking about the next days work, checking emails off my phone, mindlessly filling the void with social media scrolling rather than seeing the soul of God in the person next to me or in front of me. Another reason why it is so hard to keep this rule because we so often want to strike back when someone hurts us.

Some time back I was watching a film called 42, biopic about the life of Jackie Robinson. There is one scene that jumped out at me while writing this message that I think perfectly captures the essence of do no harm. In the scene Branch Ricky is about to offer a contract to Jackie Robinson but he is interviewing because you see this is a very important decision, the signing of this contract will mean the integration of major league baseball and it will mean Jackie Robinson will be, not maybe, but will be the victim of a lot of abuse and hatred and racism. And so Branch Ricky is interviewing him and telling him about all the things he is going to face and can he handle it and Jackie Robinson says back "are you saying you are looking for someone to fight back?" and

Branch Ricky says "I'm looking for someone who has the guts not to fight back." That's so hard. But Jesus Christ did that. That's what the cross represents. Jesus fulfilled God's purpose for his life and it led him to a cross and look what the cross led him too. The merits of the cross mean that on the cross whatever we have done to hurt people can be forgiven, whatever hurt we have in us can be healed, we can have new life, thank God that Jesus fulfilled all 3 of those rules, the first of which being do no harm.

Well, what would happen, what happens when we do no harm? What happens? Well, think about it, when you know that I'm not going to harm you and I know you aren't going to harm me it changes the climate from one of fear to trust. It creates time and space for us to find common ground and commonality. If we can't work out our differences then at least we can discern the appropriate and right way to act towards one another.

One of my favorite things to emerge from this crisis and tension at the border was a video that surfaced recently of an artist who installed see-saws along the border gates so that children could play with another even if through a gate. That while the parents and adults fight, name call and criminalize one another, the children remind us that all life is sacred and beautiful in God's eyes. The children remind us the difficult task of doing no harm. It's just a beginning, a small beginning, but it's a beginning. What would happen if you and me were to put this rule into practice this week? What would happen if we endeavored everyday to do no harm?

A pastor Rev. Bob Johnson of First United Methodist Church in Houston Texas was preaching this same message of do no harm to his congregation, as part of an accountability project he decided to do a diary everyday, a blog, he decided to share with this congregation the things he was learning as he was going through these 3 rules. One of the things he shared when working through this first rule is that when he practiced it for a week his wife told him she saw an amazing change. What would happen in our homes if we were to practice this rule? What would happen in our church? In our denomination? What would happen in our community? What would happen in the world if we endeavored to do no harm?

Beginning tomorrow morning I'm going to make a vow and my vow will be this: I will be on guard so that all my actions and my silence will not injury to another of God's children or any part of God's creation and then I'm going to pray joining in the with the words of my ancestor in the faith Mr. Wesley and say: "Spirit of God descend upon my heart; wean it from earth through all my impulses move. Stoop to my weakness mighty as thou art and make me to love thee as I ought to love." I invite you to do the same. Let us stand and sing.