

“Three Simple Rules: Do No Harm”

Galatians 5:13-18

March 8, 2009

GR FUMC

Last week, Pastor Gary began our series on The Three Simple Rules by talking about the “mark of a Methodist”: the spirit of Christian love that builds congregations and allows them to reach out to individuals in need. He told us the story of a state trooper who, because he had once been supported by a church friend, was able in turn to befriend the man who caused the car accident that permanently injured the trooper’s daughter. This week we hear a similar story, but with a very different ending. It comes to us from Rev. Dan Dick, the author of *Vital Signs*, the book about congregational vitality that we used last spring as catalyst for our worship and preaching themes.

Dan Dick writes about a church member named Carl, a man he describes as a huge, lovable, mountain of a man. Carl was middle-aged, single, independently wealthy, friendly, and deeply devoted to God. Carl stood fully seven-foot tall, wide as a doorway, with a bushy beard — reminiscent of Bluto from the old *Popeye* comic strip if you are of a certain age, or Hagrid from the Harry Potter series, if you are of another age. After a troubled childhood and a stormy adolescence, Carl experienced a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ. Out of deep gratitude for his own salvation, Carl committed his life to introducing everyone he met to Christ.

Somehow, Carl found his way to the small United Methodist church Dan served. Most of the members of this two-century old church were lifelong members from community families. Newcomers found themselves held at arm's length by an unseen force that effectively separated outsiders from insiders. No one was unfriendly or

unwelcoming. They simply let newcomers enter in so far and no farther. Carl seemed oblivious to this force, and he welcomed himself into our church family.

On his very first Sunday, Carl strode down the aisle to the front pew and slid in. There he sat smiling, committing his full attention to the service of worship. The majority of the congregation committed its attention to Carl.

Over time, this small congregation embraced Carl in spite of itself. He was so friendly, kind, generous, and lovable that he was met, first with tolerance, but soon with real affection. In no time at all, Carl "belonged." However, Carl was not content to find a church just for himself. Carl was committed to bringing "friends" with him; and every person Carl ever met, he considered a friend.

No Sunday passed where Carl did not usher in a trio of "new friends" to his favorite pew up front. Generally, none of Carl's "friends" knew one another. In fact, it is unlikely they would know one another other apart from Carl's influence. Homeless people, lawyers, teachers, short-order cooks, doctors, and college students found themselves riding together in Carl's car on their way to church.

Some of Carl's friends found a home in the congregation, although many did not. Longtime members were often distressed about the people Carl invited. They saw disruptions where Carl saw children of God. Carl, they could accept; it was Carl's "friends" who caused them problems.

One Sunday following worship, Dan re-entered the sanctuary to find an impromptu caucus assembled by the piano. As he approached the group, one woman nearly shouted: "What are we going to do about Carl?!" Dan stood gaping at her. The

woman continued, "You have to do something about Carl. This has got to stop. He needs to learn how we do things here."

Although he knew there was discomfort in the congregation, Dan had no idea of the depth of feeling about what Carl was doing. Where he experienced Carl as a breath of fresh air, others perceived him as a threat. Dan knew that nothing would be gained by responding in anger, so he withdrew to give himself time to shape an appropriate response. But God, fate, and Carl intervened.

The following Sunday as worship began, Dan took his seat behind the pulpit and looked out on the congregation. To his surprise, the front pew was empty. Without fail for the last several months, Carl had arrived each week fifteen minutes before the service with his entourage in tow, but not that morning.

The processional hymn began and the choir moved forward through the aisles. They were in place in the choir loft and were about to start the fourth verse when the doors at the rear of the sanctuary burst inward. The fourth verse quickly became an instrumental as people stopped singing to gawk. In marched Carl followed by seventeen inmates and four armed guards from the nearby correctional facility. The prisoners were in prison uniforms and leg irons. Carl ushered them forward to the first few pews, asking folks to "scrunch over" where necessary. As the final organ strains of the hymn faded away, silence fell upon the assembly. Dan looked down at the bulletin on the pulpit, his attention riveted to his own sermon title, "Release to the Captives." God moves in mysterious ways.

Carl's "prison ministry" brought everything to a head. Dan fielded dozens of phone calls and visits in the first twenty-four hours after the service. Carl himself came

by and told Dan, with tears in his eyes, that he thought it might be a good idea for him to look for another church. He no longer felt welcome, and he didn't think anyone else shared his passion for evangelism. He didn't want to make people uncomfortable, and he couldn't stand the feeling that people didn't like him. Twisting a baseball cap in both his mammoth hands, Carl asked, "What did I do wrong?"

Carl moved on to other congregations, but none was able to honor his wonderful gifts. He never found a church where he fit in. A few years ago, Dan received word that Carl had passed away. Rarely a week goes by, he says, that he doesn't feel remorse and a deep sense that he let Carl down. He's ashamed that there wasn't a place for Carl in the church that he pastored.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For 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."

The people in the early Christian church Galatia were looking for easy answers to hard questions about faith. "Of what does faith consist?" they were asking. "What do we have to *do* in order to obey Jesus and get God to accept us?" There were preachers who were coming through and saying to the church, "If you only observe the laws, if you are only are circumcised, if you are only willing to eat in certain ways, you can be a follower of Jesus."

No! Paul said. Faith does not consist of slavishly following religious rules. Salvation does not consist of devotion to the law; rather it is a gift of God and God's grace. Grace sets us free from captivity to the law.

But Paul makes it equally clear that this is an interesting kind of freedom, a freedom that is not just, "Okay I can do anything I please." Our freedom in faith is framed by a covenant, by a love of God. Freedom is not license. It is freedom to act within the context of a relationship with God, a relationship of love. Paul reminds the people of Galatia that we are called to respond to a loving and graceful God by loving our neighbor as ourselves. That means that we are to show esteem for our neighbors and ourselves. We are to desire to help our neighbor. We are free not simply to be at liberty, but we are free to be more freely loving; and if we are more freely loving, we will be a people who seek a more just and supportive society in which people, to use Paul's words, "no longer bite and devour one another."

Writing on this part of Scripture, Methodist founder John Wesley said "Ye have been called to liberty - from sin and misery, as well as from the ceremonial law. Only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh; take not occasion from hence to gratify corrupt nature. But by love serve one another and hereby show that Christ has made you free. If, on the contrary... ye bite one another by evil speaking and devour one another, by railing and clamor, take heed ye be not consumed one of another. By bitterness, strife, and contention, our health and strength -- both of body and soul -- are consumed, as well as our substance and reputation."

If you are in one of our Lenten small groups studying the book "3 Simple Rules," or if you are simply reading it on your own, you know that Wesley instructed the earliest

followers of the Methodist movement to live "First, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced . . ." Even before listing good things to do, Wesley began by listing harmful things to avoid doing.

Those who have already discussed the first chapter on "Do No Harm," have discovered just how hard *not* doing harm really is! As our own young ethicists have pointed out, it's all too easy to say something in ignorance or without knowing that it will cause hurt. And that's just in the realm of personal interaction. When you start asking where the clothes you buy are made, how the food you eat is grown, and at what cost the fuel in your car is produced – then trying to "do no harm" seems impossible! Arriving at that we can sometimes see only two responses: tossing out the whole effort because it's too hard, or succumbing to "the paralysis of analysis" -- not doing anything because you fear doing something wrong.

If you find yourself at this point – desiring to "do no harm" but fearing that it's simply not humanly possible – then you have arrived at the right place. It's not humanly possible. It is only possible through God's merciful action in our lives. It is only possible through God's merciful forgiveness in our lives. As much as we may wish to, as much as we may strive to, as much as we may muster all the resources of our education and determination and work ethic, "doing no harm" – on our own – is not do-able. We need God's forgiveness because we are human beings and we will, inevitably, commit the very harm we wish to avoid.

Before he was imprisoned in a concentration camp by the Nazi government, Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer led an illegal, underground seminary. In his little book called *Life Together*, he says that life in Christian community "forms us for

forgiveness by ridding us of the illusion that we can live without it. When things go smoothly, Christians think it is their own good will and high ideals that have produced this effect. When things become difficult, as they always will, and the idealized image is shattered they first accuse others, then God, then themselves.”

Bonhoeffer says that trouble in our congregation causes us to focus on our need to forgive. Then we see that “it is not a human ideal but God’s forgiving love that makes community possible:

Because God already has laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive. We thank God for what God has done for us. We thank God for giving us other Christians who live by God’s call, forgiveness, and promise. We do not complain about what God does not give us; rather we are thankful for what God does give us daily. And is not what has been given us enough: other believers who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing God’s grace?

Our moments of great disillusionment with others are actually good for us, he says, because they “so thoroughly teach us that we can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.” (quoted in Bass and Niedner, 12)

The 1984 film, *Places in the Heart* opens with Depression-era images of small-town Texas filling the screen. A congregation sings “Blessed Assurance” in the background. The camera settles on the Spalding family – husband, wife, son and daughter – saying grace around their Sunday dinner. The meal is soon interrupted. Mr.

Spaulding is the sheriff, and he has to go down to the train tracks to deal with Wiley, a drunken young man who is playing with a gun. Within hours, both will be dead – Spaulding accidentally shot, and Wiley, who is black, lynched.

The rest of the movie tells the story of Mrs. Spaulding's struggle to keep her home and family intact in the face of miserable economic odds and the harm done by others in ways that range from ordinary to horrendous. Her son Frank misbehaves in the usual 12-year old ways. Wayne, her brother-in-law, is unfaithful to Margaret, her sister and best friend. Mr. Denby, the banker, shows no mercy as the date of her mortgage payment draws near. A group of Klansmen is barely prevented from killing Moses, the black man who has helped her bring in a good crop.

The film exposes the many big and little ways in which we harm each other. But our mutual harmfulness is not allowed the final word. "The final scene takes place in church on another Sunday morning. The preacher rises to read the lesson from 1 Corinthians 13: Love is patient; love is kind, not jealous or boastful; love never ends. Quietly, Margaret puts her hand in Wayne's offering forgiveness. When communion is celebrated, Wayne passes the bread to his wife, then the tray of cups. They continue, from hand to hand through the congregation to Mr. Denby, the banker, and then to Moses, to men who may be the Klansmen who tried to lynch him, and to 12-year old Frank, and then to Mrs. Spaulding. She serves her late husband, the sheriff, who is now seated beside her, and he then serves Wiley, the boy who shot him. "Peace of God," they say. (Bass and Niedner, 13)

What if this final scene of communal forgiveness were extended to include not just a small congregation in Texas, but the whole body of Christ? What if we could see the

exchange of bread and cup among all who have ever shared in the grace of the Lord's Supper? Somewhere in that mix would be the old church father Athanasius giving the bread to the once angry opponents who exiled him 7 times over disagreements of doctrine. Protestant martyr Thomas Cranmer would appear as well, offering the blood of Christ to men who in righteous anger burned him at the stake as an act of praise to God. Sooner or later the congregation would break into one of those hymns that 16th C Anabaptists composed on their way to being drowned in their own baptisteries by Catholics and Lutherans. Soldiers whom we sent to destroy one another in all our many wars, and enemies of every other kind as well, would pass the "peace of God" from one to the other. 'Amen's' would rise up from worshippers of every nation and race. (Bass and Niedner, 13-14)

And somewhere near the end of the last pew we would see ourselves, passing the bread and sharing the peace:

- those of us who would welcome Carl's seventeen visiting prisoners and those of us who would hesitate;
- those of us who gossip about others and those about whom we gossip;
- those of us with checkered pasts and those of us who have always walked the straight and narrow;
- those of us who have had to ask for help and those of us who have refused to give it

All of us wishing the world to be a better place, all of us seeking to avoid doing the harm that makes it less than we would hope, all of us failing to reach that goal, except by the grace of God, which we share as we become the body of Christ.

References

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Tim Downs, "Jesus Means Freedom: Galatians 5:1; 13-25, November 14, 2004" at http://day1.org/617-jesus_means_freedom

Geoffrey Hoare, "Enemies: Psalm 25:1-10; Mark 1:9-15, March 01, 2009" at <http://day1.org/1201-enemies>

John Wesley, "Notes on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians" *Wesley's Notes on the Bible* at www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.html

Kylie Question 1: Harm means doing something mean to someone else. Like hurting feelings, talking behind someone's back, making fun of someone or not including someone. I think it is possible to harm someone without knowing it. You could say something that hurts someone without knowing it.

Question 3: To not harm others, we could try to think about how what we do will affect someone else. We should always try to be kind.

Kyle: To do harm is to have a negative effect on your surroundings. Yes, it is possible to do harm without knowing it if you talk "bad" (or spread rumors) about someone behind their back and then they find out.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, close to us as breathing and distant as the farthest star, we give you thanks for your many gifts to us; but, above all today, we give you thanks for the gift of grace, the gift through which the Apostle Paul reached out to the people in Galatia and a gift with which you reach out to us through Jesus Christ and each generation. By that grace, O God, transform us, renew us, and call us again to be a people of your purpose, children of your righteousness. We pray this in the name of Christ. Amen.