The Character of a United Methodist  
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Matthew 22:34-40  
When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Galatians 5:22-26  
But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

I have had the privilege of being with this congregation since Friday evening and all day yesterday. What a blessing it is to be here. And I know that you feel blessed by being a part of this congregation. What a fest you have every Sunday morning. The feast of this wonderful music and the way it helps us to express our love for Christ. I have felt in this church, a warmth and a concern for each other, that points beyond itself to God. Thank you so much for the privilege of blessing my life by being in your presents.

I think you know you have one of the most gifted and committed pastors in the Memphis Annual Conference. Would you like to express your appreciation now for your Pastor and for your staff?

Before I preach, let us pray: May these words not be my words but your words. Help me to get myself out of the way so I can simply be a vessel for Your Word today. Amen.

John Wesley: The Simple Rules

As you know, John Wesley was the founder of Methodism. When the Methodist movement was first getting started, John Wesley gave those early Methodists some simple rules by which to live. It is easy to have an amnesia about those rules; to forget them, to not recall them. But I like to recall those rules for us today.

John Wesley gave three simple rules to those early Methodists.

The first rule was, “Do no harm and avoid evil of every kind”. The Methodist people were people who were to do no harm and avoid evil of every kind. He said we were not to take the Lord’s name in vain and that we were not to betray the Sabbath. We were not to do brawling or drunkenness, or slaveholding or quarrelling or laying up for ourselves treasures. John Wesley even said that we are to avoid costly apparel. That having too much costly apparel was doing harm because he believed that Methodists should live a simple life. Rather than spend money on costly things, the money that we have should be used to advance the movement. So he asked these early Methodist to live simple lives of humble stewardship.

It also reminds us that we can do harm with our words and deeds. The words we use can either hurt or heal. We can do harm by preforming actions that do not reflect the glory of God and when we do not do what love requires of us.

I was in my office one day and I got a telephone call from a man and I could tell by the sound of his voice what he wanted. We talked for a minute and he said, “Bishop, we need another pastor at our church.
I want you to move our preacher.” I said, “Help me understand why. You now have a children’s Sunday school when you did not have one before. You now have a children’s choir. You know have a Wednesday night dinner and program for the community. Your fellowship hall is full of people. You have received new people into the church this year. Why do you want another pastor?” And he said, “Well, Bishop, you need to understand. Those are the wrong kind of people. We want a pastor that will bring our kind of people into the church.” I guess he never heard the rule of Mr. Wesley, to “do no harm”.

Then John Wesley said that Methodists should go about doing good to all people. Back then he said, and I quote, _We need to go about doing good, giving food to the hungry, clothing the naked, be visiting them that are sick, in prison._ Mr. Wesley loved the poor. He dwelt with the poor. He cared about the poor. In one of his journal writings he said _that we meet Christ in the poor._ If that is true; if we tend to people who are poor and marginalized, and pushed aside and lonely, and broken and hurting; in that strange way we meet Christ in the poor.

The United Methodist church now goes about doing good as Mr. Wesley asked us to do. We have ministries in over 100 counties in the world. We are there with hospitals, orphanages, congregations, schools, and pastors, and colleges and farming cooperatives. In fact, it is almost hard to go to a county in the world where the people called “Methodists” are not present in some way.

The great Nelson Mandela received the world peace award after he had spent all of those years in prison for standing up against apartheid in South Africa. When he received the word peace award, Nelson Mandela said, “Had it not been for the Methodist school in my village, I would not be standing here today.”

There are many examples of where this congregation has gone about doing good. Your Pastor, a bit ago, shared opportunities where you could go about doing good.

As you know, I teach at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Last week near the end of class, I shared with my class that I was going to be at Germantown United Methodist Church this weekend. After class was over, there was one student there, she hung back a bit. I knew she wanted to talk. When the other students left the class she came up to me and said, “Oh, I am so glad you are going to Germantown United Methodist Church”. She said, “I was on the staff a Mountain T.O.P”. And she said, “Germantown Methodist was always there every summer to help with that ministry.” Most of you know that Mountain T.O.P. is a ministry in the mountains of east and middle Tennessee that responds to the needs of the poor who live there, in the remote, rural areas.” She went on to tell me that she would come here and sell products to help raise money for Mountain T.O.P. Then she said, “We have a worship center at Mountain T.O.P called the Doug Lamb worship center.” And she said, “Mr. Lamb is a member of Germantown United Methodist Church”. She said, “My husband and I got married in that worship center.” And she said, “one day when I was worshiping there. I felt a call to the ordained ministry. Now”, she said, “I am in divinity school. Because of what happened to me at the Doug Lamb Worship Center.

You just went about doing well and one of your congregants went about doing well. Seeds were planted. You have no way of knowing how those seeds will grow. Touch the life of a couple; touch the life of a woman who felt the call to ordained ministry. She is a very gifted, compassionate person who will serve the church and serve it well. That is what Mr. Wesley asked us to do: to do no harm and to go about doing good.

The third rule he gave us was to attend upon all the ordinances of God so that we might stay and love with God. We cannot go about doing good and we cannot avoid doing harm unless we stay in
love with God. John Wesley spoke of the importance of “the means of grace.” The means of grace are worship, searching the scriptures, prayer, holy communion, fasting, and Christian fellowship. These are the ways grace comes into our lives. How I ask you can grace come into our lives if we do not worship? If we do not pray? If we do not search the scriptures? If we do not take Holy Communion? If we do not practice Christian fellowship? How can grace get into us? – unless we keep those disciplines that are a part of our rich and wonderful heritage.

If we are to do good and do no harm, it is important that we stay in love with God.

Closing

The way we show our love for God, is by loving other people. The way we show our love for God is by loving our neighbor. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with heart, soul, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself. The way we show our love for God is by loving all people: whites, blacks, Jews, Muslims, gays, straights, rich and poor and those who have been mistreated or neglected.

The Apostle Paul here in Galatians speaks of how to live as loving and caring people in the world. He talks about the attributes necessary if we are to do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God. Paul speaks of embodying love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control.

We Methodists are that people who seek to do no harm; who seek to do all the good we can; and who seek to stay in love with God.