

First Things First

As November marches on many minds turn to thoughts of holiday preparation, shopping lists, cooking and baking and instruction manuals. Reading the instructions and warnings included with many products reminds us just how vastly different we are. Perhaps you heard or come across some like the following:

On hairdryer: Do not use while sleeping.

On a bar of soap: Directions: Use like regular soap.

On packaging for an iron: Do not iron clothes on body.

On a packet of nuts: Instructions: open packet, eat nuts.

On a chainsaw: Do not attempt to stop chain with your hands.

On a helmet mounted mirror used by cyclists: Remember objects in the mirror are actually behind you.

No wonder many are more likely to ignore instructions than following them. Following instructions can seem difficult or senseless. Though there are those who always begin with reading the instruction, many set them aside, turning to them only if and when their best attempts fail.

Rules are like instructions but different. Instructions guide us to accomplish something. Rules set standards, rules indicate authority, rules often deal with personal interactions, with relationship, rather than objects and often there are consequences when we ignore or break the rules.

As a denomination, we are in the midst of reclaiming John Wesley's general rules for members in the societies formed by those dedicated to living out their faith in the manner Wesley proclaimed. These general rules are named "3 simple rules" by retired Bishop Rueben Job. They are not the only rules John wrote, we have his rules for health, rules for singing, just naming two of many. Yet these "general" rules address all aspects of life, they call us to living faithfully and deliberately.

Though simple to remember and repeat, they are anything but simple. Obedience to them takes determination, dedication and dependence on God. They do not come naturally, they are not what is taught by osmosis from the culture around us. They are radical, radical not only in Wesley's time but ours. When obeyed and embraced they have the power to open us to God's transforming power. They shape the person we are and are becoming, and like instructions and manuals; they are subject to interpretation, explanation, and misunderstandings.

The first rule, in Wesley's words: "doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced", restated by Job as do no harm, has a odd ring in the ears of a society that is so focused on doing. We are not schooled in "not doing". We are more likely to think about and look at actions, not the lack of them. Many of us love to make a list, even check it twice, yet how does one list doing no harm separate from our listing of doing good? What does it mean, and how would we be changed by keeping this first rule – first.

Wesley is clear that we are called not only to avoid or reframe from the most detrimental and deliberate methods of harming others. He demands the avoidance of evil of every kind. Evil is not a word many of us associate with our own behaviors. We would like to believe that evil is something greater, darker, than our judgments, gossiping, belittling, grudge holding, greed (pause to see if congregation is willing to name other attitudes)

Yet evil, like sin, needs to be understood as that which is in opposition to God, to goodness, to love of self and neighbor. Rev. Brad Smith reminded his congregation that *"Doing no harm does not just mean physical harm. It means that I will not undermine anyone to get what I want. I will not cheat you, swindle you, or talk you into something I know will lead to harm. I will not gossip behind your back, I will not spread rumors about you. I will not call you stupid or ignorant because of how you dress, or act, or believe. I will not think you are stupid because you do things or believe differently. I will not tear you down in order to build myself up. I will not mutter under my breath with you cut me off. I will not smile to your face and then stick a knife in your back."*

Rev. Smith cuts right to the heart, the heart of the ways we so easily and thoughtlessly do harm, that which John Wesley named as that which is most generally practiced. Bishop Job tells us that to do no harm is a proactive response to all that is evil in the world - all that is damaging and destructive to humankind and God's good creation, and therefore, ultimately destructive to us

In the economic struggle we are facing, we are called to first do no harm. We are not to put our own well-being above the well-being of any others. We may decry the actions and choices of others, yet we are to see others, even the CEO's, the powerful, the ones we trusted our savings to, as beloved children of God. We are to pray for them, to not belittle them in word or thought, to not wish them harm of any form.

In the political transition of our nation, we are to be graceful winners and good losers. We are not to divide ourselves into camps. We are not to look for wrongs; we are to work for unity. Yours and mine are to become "ours", as leaders at every level need both support and accountability in order to serve the greater good, and need our faithful and fervent prayers in order to avoid evil.

Yet the greatest opportunity and challenge to embracing this rule is in the daily interactions and attitudes of our most ordinary, everyday living. We can determine that every day of our lives will be, returning to the words of Bishop Job, *"invested in the effort*

to bring healing instead of hurt; wholeness instead of division; and harmony with the ways of Jesus rather than the ways of the world.” We can accept that in order to fully live, we must deny our selfish habits and tendencies. We can chose to forgive, to let go and to move into the new day which God is continually bringing forth.

To do no harm means we must redefine our understandings of wealth, of winning, of rights and of what is necessary. We must acknowledge that all too often it is we who lack grace and understanding, who forget that we are brother and sister, each and all made in the image of God, and that we hold on to things, issues and attitudes which will pass way, while forgetting that it is love that will last eternally.

I suspect there will be a number of instruction manuals which are ignored or tossed over the next few months. Let's not confuse these life bringing rules with such. If we are to, by the grace of God, live by the three rules, we must being with a commitment and focus on the first. Do no harm, avoiding the less than godly attitudes, words and actions which come so easily.

Let us do so with thanksgiving and joy, knowing that this simple rule is not meant to confine us but to renew us into a Christ like life. It is meant to help us live with our brothers and sisters in the world in the way that God wanted. It is only when we allow God to change us, that God can change the world.