

Three Simple Rules: Do Good
3 John 11
September 14, 2008
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
David Beckett, D.Min.

Today is the second in our series on the book, "Three Simple Rules." These are three simple rules given to us by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Last Sunday we focused on the first rule, "Do no harm." Today the second rule is "do good."

Let's dig into the history of rules for living. In the 6th century an Italian monk by the name of St. Benedict wrote a book that described how monks should live together. It was known as the Rule of St. Benedict and there are monastic communities living by it today. In the 13th century Francis of Assisi heard a sermon and devoted the rest of his life to living simply in solidarity with the poor. Today there are Franciscan communities all over the world practicing the same rule.

Have you ever thought about having a rule for your life? Maybe you already have one but don't know it. I bet some of you have the rule of treating others the way you want to be treated. Others of you probably try to live by the ten commandments. Personally I try to go with Jesus' rule of loving God and others as yourself which is two-thirds of John Wesley's simple rules.

Our scripture today from 3 John blows me away. In an age where religious leaders use the Bible to exclude and divide people into categories this scripture stands at the other end of the continuum. "Whoever does good is from God." (vs. 11) Imagine what this means. You don't have to be a born-again Christian or an orthodox Jew or a Shiite Muslim or a Buddhist to have God's approval! If you do good, you are from God! This is radical stuff!

We would admit that it is easier to do good to people who will be grateful or return the good deed than it is to do good to those who will be ungrateful or who will spit in our face. What was and continues to be radical in the message of Jesus is that doing good should extend to our enemies as well as our friends!

There was a time during World War I when soldiers confronted each other from their respective trenches. It was Christmas Eve. And a German soldier was heard singing, "Silent Night" in German. British soldiers began to sing back, in English. Soon both sides were singing and an unofficial truce was declared as soldiers, under white flags, joined each other in no-man's land. And they celebrated Christmas together. When they returned to their respective sides, they wouldn't fire on each other any longer. The enemy now had a face, and it looked like theirs. The troops had to be replaced on each side because they fired over each other's heads rather than at each other.

Doing good, especially to our enemies, is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's not about defining people by categories or labels. The gospel transcends such categories and labels. God desires to reach into the heart of every person with unconditional love and grace. And much of it happens when ordinary people like you and me live by this rule of doing good.

This is a message much easier said and preached than living out in reality. The truth is and we all know it, that doing good, deep good, can get you into trouble. A newcomer arrived at the Pearly Gates, wanting St. Peter to let him in. "Well, young man, can you tell me about any good deed you've done in the past?" "Yes, I can. I rescued a lady who was being attacked by a motorcycle gang. I kicked the leader of the gang, and punched him until he let her go. And then I kicked over his motorcycle, which in turn knocked over all the other motorcycles, just like dominoes!" "Well, that's impressive," said St. Peter. "When did you do this good deed?" To which the young man replied, "about two minutes ago!"

Where are the boundaries of doing good? How much good and to whom should we do it? Bishop Job writes, "Now I am willing to do a little good, maybe even give another couple of hundred dollars to my congregation, and now and then give a contribution to Habitat for Humanity, or the local food bank; but tell me, where are the boundaries?"¹ Job talks about our desire to control our lives as the biggest reason we find it hard to push the boundaries of our good acts.

Doing good is hard also because of our need for order. If we find it hard to cope with chaos when it squirts into our lives we may miss opportunities to stretch the boundaries of doing good.

For example six-year-old Brandon decided one Saturday morning to fix his parents pancakes. He found a big bowl and spoon, pulled a chair to the counter, opened the cupboard and pulled out the heavy flour canister, spilling it on the floor. He scooped some of the flour into the bowl with his hands, mixed in most of a cup of milk and added some sugar, leaving a floury trail on the floor which by now had a few tracks left by his kitten.

Brandon was covered with flour and getting frustrated. He wanted this to be something very good for Mom and Dad, but it was getting very bad. He didn't know what to do next, whether to put it all into the oven or on the stove and he didn't know how the stove worked! Suddenly he saw his kitten licking from the bowl of mix and reached to push her away, knocking the egg carton to the floor. Frantically he tried to clean up this monumental mess but slipped on the eggs, getting his pajamas white and sticky.

And just then he saw Dad standing at the door. Big crocodile tears welled up in Brandon's eyes. All he'd wanted to do was something good, but he'd made a terrible mess. He was sure a scolding was coming. But his father walked through the mess, picked up his crying son, hugged him and loved him, getting his own pajamas white and sticky in the process!

This father was able to relinquish control of his son for the moment and see past the chaos to see the boundaries of good stretched to include a 6-year old. Think about the messes you have caused because of your desire to do good. When have your good intentions been misinterpreted and judged by others? Just because we might mess up, we can't stop trying to "make pancakes" for God or for others. Sooner or later we'll get it right, and then they'll be glad we tried.

Part of the problem with doing good is that we often depend on cues from others before we do good things. Bishop Job writes, "The truth is that my gift of goodness may be rejected, ridiculed, and misused. But my desire to do good is not limited by the

¹ Three Simple Rules, Reuben Job, p. 38.

thoughts or actions of others. My desire to do good is in response to God's invitation to follow Jesus, and it is in my control. I can determine to extend hospitality and goodness to all I meet. I can decide to do good to all, even to those who disagree with me and turn against what I believe is right and good."² In other words it is our desire to be a disciple of Jesus Christ that needs to motivate our good deeds, not the acceptability of the person or the act.

Is there a good thing that you can do this week? Who would be the recipient? Maybe it would help to make the good thing be anonymous. For several years now one of you have been leaving an Easter basket on our doorstep on Easter morning. While I would like to know who to thank, I also respect that this act of goodness does not depend on the reward of a thank you. Just doing it is reward enough.

A story is told of a mother and daughter in their last moments together at the airport. They had announced the departure. Standing near the security gate, they hugged and the mother said, "I love you and I wish you enough." Another woman was observing this intimate moment.

The daughter replied, "Mom, our life together has been more than enough. Your love is all I ever needed. I wish you enough, too, Mom." They kissed and the daughter left. The mother walked over to the window where I was seated. Standing there I could see she wanted and needed to cry. I tried not to intrude on her privacy but she welcomed me in by asking, "Did you ever say goodbye to someone knowing it would be forever?"

"Yes, I have," I replied. "Forgive me for asking, but why is this a forever goodbye?"

"I am old and she lives so far away. I have challenges ahead and the reality is — the next trip back will be for my funeral," the mother said.

"When you were saying goodbye, I heard you say, 'I wish you enough.' May I ask what that means?"

She began to smile. "That's a wish that has been handed down from other generations. My parents used to say it to everyone." She paused a moment and looked up as if trying to remember it in detail and she smiled even more. "When we said, 'I wish you enough,' we were wanting the other person to have a life filled with just enough good things to sustain them." Then turning toward me, she shared the following as if she were reciting it from memory.

"I wish you enough sun to keep your attitude bright no matter how gray the day may appear. I wish you enough rain to appreciate the sun even more. I wish you enough happiness to keep your spirit alive and everlasting. I wish you enough pain so that even the smallest of joys in life may appear bigger. I wish you enough gain to satisfy your wanting. I wish you enough loss to appreciate all that you possess. I wish you enough hellos to get you through the final goodbye."³

Doing good is so simple, yet so complicated. If you and I are to do more good this coming week it will mean we will not fear complications and chaos. Scripture reminds us that God is in every good act. So go forth and do good. Get your children involved. Do good things in your neighborhood. Be a good deed doer in your school and your workplace. And always remember that the simple act of doing good is reward

² Three Simple Rules, Reuben Job, p. 40.

³ Source unknown. Retrieved from www.homiletics.com on Sept. 9, 2008.

enough.