

Three Simple Rules: Do No Harm
Galatians 5:13-21
September 7, 2008
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
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How do you deal with chaos? Do you tend to thrive with lots of noise and disorder in your life? When life becomes too orderly with too many rules do you like to stir things up and create some chaos? If you're like most people you like order, at least some order. I guess there are people who like order too much. They think that life can be managed best when there are lots of rules. Most parents struggle with finding the right balance between discipline and permissiveness with their parenting styles.

My personality is such that I need a certain amount of order in my life. This need probably stems from my experience growing up as the first born of four kids. Kim is the last of five. We are at the tail end of raising our own four children. My need for order. Four children. I wonder who will win that struggle! Many years ago I recall feeling overwhelmed with the chaos of our home. Four children under the age of 7. Kid chaos was destined to win over parental order. I walked into the family room and stopped dead in my tracks at the sight of utter chaos. No kids were present but the evidence of their lives was spread all over the room. Toys were everywhere! I was tempted to given in to the chaos and feel the frustration when in what I consider a God-moment, I simply breathed deeply and sighed this prayer. "Thank you, God. Thank you for my chaotic life and these wonderful children."

Contrast this when I did not choose the better way one night in Soldotna. The kids were being especially chaotic and I lost it. Shouting at the top of my voice I was interrupted by the door bell. Opening the door was a church member who obviously had heard my tirade. Sometimes our response to chaos can be embarrassing. We generally prefer to hide such responses. And sometimes we think that by hiding them from others we keep them hidden from God.

Now it needs to be said that God is not always found in moments of order. God is present in the chaos and angry responses to chaos, and also moments of order. In the Bible in the creation stories we see that God prefers order over chaos as the best place to be if we want to know God and live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It's a little like trying to catch a bus. You can wander the city hoping to hail a bus and be successful. But if you want to be sure to get on the right bus you will want to get a bus schedule and go to the right bus stop.

We can experience God in moments of chaos, but if we want to be certain not to miss God then we need to put ourselves in moments of structure and order so that we have the best chance at experiencing God.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, believed this with all his heart. Growing up with proper English discipline John was very comfortable with the order that rules can offer. Fortunately for him he spent time in the rough and rowdy Georgia colony where his attempt to impose English order onto these new Americans caused him to return to England a miserable failure. In this major challenge to his way of thinking about Christianity and world he had a powerful encounter with God. This

Spirit-experience at Aldersgate Street enabled him to fuse together the power of God working in a Christian's life with a way of holy living that is constantly reformed the individual and the community.

So he devised a few rules...three of them...three simple rules to guide the Christian. Reuben Job is a retired bishop of the United Methodist Church who wrote this little book. It is this book that is the subject of this three-part sermon series and also the topic of discussion at our study group at 6:30 this Wednesday after supper. And the first rule is three words: DO NO HARM.

What does it mean to DO NO HARM? This is a part of the Hippocratic Oath that physicians take. It should be a part of every Christian's way of living in this world. Bishop Job writes, "Even a child can understand what it means. When we agree that we will not harm those with whom we disagree, conversation, dialogue, and discovery of new insight become possible. When our words and actions are guarded by this first simple rule, we have time and space to think about consequences before a word is spoken or an action taken."¹

How can this rule make a difference in your life? If you choose to live by it then it will mean you will not allow yourself to gossip about people, or speak disparagingly, or manipulate the facts when involved in a conflict. Bishop Job writes, "When I am determined to do no harm to you, I lose my fear of you; and I am able to see you and hear you more clearly."²

Why do more people not live by this rule? Two reasons according to Bishop Job. The first reason is because although this rule is simple, it is not easy. He writes, "More often it is a step not taken because it demands too much in the way of self-discipline and a very deep faith that God will empower and lead the faithful."³

What in your life have you been willing to give up in order to gain something of greater value? Can you see yourself being able to give up speaking badly of others in order to fulfill the promise of "do no harm?"

Author Scott Peck in his book "The Road Less Traveled" tells the story of riding downhill on a bike when he was nine. He writes, "Coasting down the hill one morning, I felt my gathering speed to be ecstatic. To give up this ecstasy by applying brakes seemed an absurd self-punishment. So I resolved to simultaneously retain my speed and negotiate the corner. My ecstasy ended seconds later when I was propelled a dozen feet off the road into the woods. I was badly scratched and bleeding, and the front wheel of my new bike was twisted beyond use from its impact against a tree. I had been unwilling to suffer the pain of giving up my ecstatic speed in the interest of maintaining my balance around the corner. I learned, however, that the loss of balance is ultimately more painful than the giving up required to maintain balance. It is a lesson I have continually had to relearn. As must everyone, for as we negotiate the curves and corners of our lives, we must continually give up parts of ourselves."⁴

If you and I are going to live by this simple rule of doing no harm it will mean that we give up a part of ourselves. There are sharp turns up ahead in your life's journey.

¹ Three Simple Rules – Reuben Job, p. 22

² Three Simple Rules – Reuben Job, p. 23

³ Three Simple Rules – Reuben Job, p. 24

⁴ Scott Peck, The Road Less Traveled.

Will you slow down in order to stay balanced on the bike? Or will you risk a crash in order to feel the high of speed?

Bishop Job writes about a second reason we find it hard to follow this rule. He believes that we often bind ourselves to a certain ideology or theology rather than binding ourselves to Jesus Christ. Those who pride themselves on their reasoning abilities fall into the trap of leaning on our thoughts about God rather than the person of God. This is a constant temptation for me. Because I allow myself to consider the questions about God I am tempted to spend too much time with my thoughts about God.

Karl Barth was a Swiss theologian in the early 20th century who wrote volumes of books about God. He confessed to a recurring dream. He saw himself arriving at the pearly gates of heaven pulling a child's red wagon, in which were neatly stacked all his writings. As he interpreted the dream, all of his knowledge and theologizing was but child's play when compared to God's greatness and grace. One of his quotes was similar. "The Word became flesh — and then through theologians it became words again."⁵

We need to be clear that our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. John Wesley believed that one of the simple rules to achieve this goal is to DO NO HARM. Bishop Job writes, "Perhaps the greatest consequence of doing no harm is that we are formed and transformed to live more and more as Jesus lived. As two people in a long and successful marriage begin to think, act, and even look like each other, so those who practice this simple rule begin to think, act, and perhaps even look like Jesus."⁶ May this be so for you and me.

⁵ Retrieved from www.homiletics.com on Sept. 3, 2008.

⁶ Three Simple Rules – Reuben Job, p. 31