

[PRAYER] [BLANK] I have a question for you, and I'd like you to think about it, for a moment. If someone asked you, "What is a Methodist?," what would you say? You don't have to answer that question out loud, but I am going to pause for a moment, and let you consider that question. [PAUSE] Okay, are we ready to go on? My guess is that in our moment of silence just now, many of you were probably a bit challenged to come up with an answer. If that was the case, please relax - I am sure that you're not alone! Most people have a hard time explaining what their particular Christian faith is about.

And because we have a hard time explaining what our faith is about, the world has a hard time understanding what our faith is about. Recent research by the Barna Group asked Americans what they thought of various Christian churches. [DATA SLIDE 1] The good news is that very few people have a negative view of Methodists - only nine percent in this Barna survey. [DATA SLIDE 2] But the bad news is that when these people were asked what they felt about Methodists, very few had a strong positive impression - most had a vaguely positive sense of Methodists. In other words, like other churches and denominations, most people really don't know what to expect from a Methodist church. [BLANK]

Someone I spoke to recently reminded me of how important it is for us to answer this question for ourselves. The person described someone who is kind of curious about faith, but who is scared to go into churches, because they don't know what to expect from one church to another! Here we are, called by God to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the world, and the world is afraid of what that means! So for their sake, for our sake, and for the sake of The United Methodist Church, we need to get better at answering the basic question, "What is a Methodist?"

The good news is that we have a simple and positive faith. We believe in God as Creator, Redeemer, and Transformer of the world. We believe that God is love, expressed most perfectly to everyone in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We believe God's love is revealed in our scriptures, the Holy Bible, which our faith experience, our God-given gift of reason, and our Christians traditions, help us to understand.

What really sets us apart as Methodists, though, what makes us distinct as a people of God, is that we are not just to love God, to praise God, to worship God, to feel good about God. No, as Methodists, we are called by God, together with all people of the world, to be more like God. God is not done with us. God saves us through faith so that we can be like God, with God's help, with everyone in the world who needs to be more like God.

In other words, Methodists are not supposed to be almost Christian - we are supposed to be real Christians, the Christians who people hope that they will find when they poke their head into a church for the first time, a people who love the Lord our God with all of our heart, all of our minds, and all of our strength, and who love our neighbors as ourselves. Period. Full stop. No ifs, ands, or buts. When someone asks, "What's a Methodist?," the answer should be simple: "Methodists are the real deal!"

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, believed this with all of his heart, from his earliest days of seeking faith. When he was at school in England, Wesley and his fellow devoted Christians were made fun of by his classmates, as “people of the Method.” In other words, they thought that trying to be a real Christian was kind of a joke! But then, Wesley began to bring his approach to faith to the working people of England. They saw what a difference it made in their lives. A year after Wesley had first preached in a field near Kingswood, a town of coal miners, Wesley wrote in his journal, “Kingswood does not now, as a year ago, resound with cursing and blasphemy. It is no more filled with drunkenness and idle diversions. It is no longer full of wars and fightings, of clamor and bitterness, of wrath and envy. Peace and love are there. Great numbers of the people are mild, gentle, and easy to approach.”

Real faith changes lives. Living a life of faith with others changes the world. It’s that simple. And so, John Wesley gave Methodism a beautiful gift - his General Rules, three simple rules for living a life of faith. These rules are in our United Methodist Church Book of Discipline, and they cannot be removed. They are the core of the movement known as Methodism, and to remove them is to remove us from who we are as Methodists.

[BOOK] Reuben Job’s book, titled “Three Simple Rules,” explains our General Rules very simply. Many of you have picked up a copy of it already, and I hope that others do, too. I invite you to discuss the book and these sermons after worship these next few Sundays. [RULE 1] The first rule reminds us that what is simplest about being like God is often the hardest thing to do: do no harm. Jesus did it so well, and, without faith in Jesus Christ, we have very little hope of doing it like Jesus, as Paul reminds us today in our reading from Romans. Even Paul, an apostle of the Christian faith, saw that he could not keep from doing harm without the help of the salvation from God that came to him only through faith in Jesus Christ. But, still, he knew that through God, all things are possible, and that God wants us to be like Jesus, no matter what!

And the first thing that we need to do to be like Jesus is to never hurt anyone or anything, including ourselves. When we do hurt someone or something, that’s called sin. In his General Rules, Wesley points out that doing wrong is “most generally practiced.” Sin is everywhere. Sin is popular! “But Mom, Joey’s Mom lets him do it, why can’t I?” Call it fear of missing out, fear of not fitting in, fear of not being enough, or having enough, fear of whatever, doing wrong is based on letting our fears rule our hearts, instead of God’s love. If we give those fears an inch, they’ll take a mile, and before long, you won’t know where you begin and your sin ends. Do no harm. Simple, but hard. Do no harm. Don’t give the fear that would make us hurtful a single inch. And the only thing that can help us to do that, consistently, persistently, and insistenty, is the saving love of God found through faith in Jesus Christ. Only Jesus can save us from doing harm. And Jesus came to us to do just that, for everyone. [BLANK]

A woman caught in adultery found this out the hard way. In today’s reading from John’s gospel, she was about to be stoned to death by the religious leaders of her town.

They were so busy thinking about their own fears that their hearts were at war with God and the world. They came to Jesus, looking for words of faith to justify their killing. Jesus refused to give those words, and instead asked them whether they were without sin. Had they done no harm? None at all? They all dropped their stones, and went away. First, do no harm. Because, without that, you have no idea whether you're doing the good God wants, nor not.

Jesus then sent the woman on her way, saying, "Go, and sin no more." Jesus forgave her sins, but Jesus made it clear: that's it. No more sin. No more hurting. Because what we do with God's forgiveness is what makes us Christians. She would not be able to do that alone. She would need Jesus, and others, to do it. But she was to do it.

Do no wrong. Never be at war with yourself, or others, or God. Always be at peace. No ifs, ands, or buts. Rely fully on God, and other people seeking to be like God, to stay at peace, and to grow in peace. And this kind of peace is not just for those who we know, but for the world. In his first General Rule, John Wesley mentions not only the personal holiness that we need, but also the social holiness that we need. He mentions slavery, corruption, saying angry things about politicians, be they good or bad, as sin, also. They are all signs that we are at war with God, and with one another, letting fear rule our hearts, rather than the saving love of God that comes from faith in Jesus Christ. Faking God's love in anything makes us less than Jesus. And Jesus came to help us be just like Jesus.

We'll never do this perfectly. And we'll never, ever, do it alone. But we are called by God to grow our faith, a day at a time, by never doing harm, first and foremost, and by always trying to make amends for our harms, bringing peace where there was war, healing where there was hurt. We are the ones who are called by God to set an example for the world of what it means to really be like Jesus, together, as the body of Christ in this world.

[PAULINE] I met a woman a few days ago from Kenya, who was working for The United Methodist Church at our global ministry offices in Washington, D.C. Her name is Pauline. When Pauline was growing up in a town in Kenya, one day a friend of hers came running into her house, and asked Pauline's father to come quickly to their house, because her friend's father was beating his children. Pauline's father ran to her friend's home, and soon the other father stopped the beating. Pauline asked her father afterwards, "I see that all the other fathers beat their children. Why don't you beat us?" Pauline's father said, "Because I love Jesus." [BLANK]

Do no harm. It is the first step of being like Jesus. Do no harm. It is the first rule of being a Methodist. It is always simple, and never easy. But it is our way of life. And it is, by God's grace, a good life. Amen.