**Sermon Series: Rules to Live by
Do No Harm by David Hockett Boone UMC**

**Romans 12 May 1, 2016**

The world we inhabit seems to be an increasingly divided, angry, conflicted place. We all know too well the political divisions that plague us. The abhorrent and childish behavior of the current crop of presidential candidates is ample evidence of that. Too often they seem content to insult one another, belittle those who disagree with them, and shout down their opponents rather than offering anything resembling a constructive solution to the real and serious problems we are facing as a nation. Even their supporters seem more focused on tearing down the supporters on the other side than coming together to listen and learn from one another and find a common way forward. When and how did listening, dialogue and compromise become four letter words?

We’ve seen similar behavior on some of our college campuses when one group decides to drown out and silence the speech of those whose positions they find unacceptable or offensive, rather than listening, and then doing the heavy lifting of forming a well-reasoned argument to counter point by point the speech they find unacceptable, or wrong, or hurtful. We demonize those with whom we disagree and cheap attacks seem easier than relationship and engagement. We plant seeds of suspicion and fear to undermine the humanity of our opponents. We talk about how *they* are a threat to *us* without ever considering we’re all on this great, big ball of clay together. It can be dishearten-ing. I had a conversation with someone the other day who said “I normally try and be a force for positive change, but sometimes you feel like there is no way to make a difference and you just want to throw up your hands and walk away.”

Sadly, we see this very same behavior often taking place in the Church. Over the years I’ve seen committees carve out territory and protect it almost like an army guarding hard-won ground. I’ve watched church members air their grievances on social media, dragging the body of Christ through the mud. I even knew of a church once where one family literally pad-locked the door so that another family couldn’t get inside the building – all in the name of Jesus.

Our General Conference, the body that meets every four years to define church doctrine and law, meets in Portland beginning May 10th. I know there are factions, and caucuses, and groups with all sorts of agendas already planning their strategies to try defeat the other side and win the day. It’s tragic and this lack of unity undermines our ability to witness to the gospel and it runs against our Lord who prayer that we might be one.

I recently read a blog post where the author, a young well-meaning Christian, instead of doing his homework and actually speaking with members of the group he was writing about, wrote a very misinformed, inaccurate article about the Fresh Expressions movement. Fresh Expressions is a renewal movement doing amazing, creative work trying to reach an increasingly secular world with the gospel.

Our own Luke Edwards has written extensively for Fresh Expressions, and King Street Church is a fresh expression of “church”. Now, I have no problem with disagreement and healthy debate, but where did this young writer learn that the best strategy would be to attack those with whom he disagreed, his own brothers and sisters in Christ, rather than actually sitting down with them and having an honest conversation? Who taught him that is a best practice in the body of Christ?

It’s one thing for the world to build walls, and silence honest conversation, and demonize those who are different, and sow seeds of fear and distrust. It’s a sad day when the church begins to mirror those tactics, and fails to offer a counter witness …where strangers might become friends, enemies are loved, walls are torn down, and disagreement and conflict actually become the soil for understanding and reconciliation. We can do better. The world needs us to do more than parrot the world’s childish, hurtful, destructive ways. If we can recover a robust dedication to the practices that make our alternative gospel way of life possible, I think this may be one of the great gifts the Church has to offer the world – to teach the world how to fight, how to engage conflict, how to navigate disagreement and differences in a way that builds up our common humanity rather than tearing it down. I think we know somewhere deep down that the direction we are heading is not a good and healthy path, so this series, *Rules to Live By*, is about what a better, more excellent way might look like.

John Wesley believed that it was possible “…to practice a way of living that is in harmony with the life of Jesus, a way of life that in fact can change the world.” (Job: 7) Wesley was committed to the early Methodists being a holy people whose life together would mirror the life of Christ Jesus. He believed that “discipleship is all about learning to walk with Christ, and resemble Christ more and more.” (Harnish) He believed that Christian community in which people walk closely with Christ would not only transform the lives of individuals but whole societies – that the Church is and can be salt and light for a dark and bland world.

So he organized those who felt God’s call on their life to walk closely with Christ…to love him and to serve him with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. He encouraged them to meet into small groups who met weekly to pray together, to hear and study God’s word, to watch over one another in love in order to help each other work out their salvation. And he articulated three simple rules which he believed made this life possible. They are simply:

Do no harm.

Do Good

Stay in Love with God

In his letter to the Church in Rome, the apostle Paul writes,

*“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life and place it before God as an offering….Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out….In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we’re talking about is Christ’s body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body....Love from the center of who you are; don’t fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle….Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath….Get along with each other; don’t be arrogant. Make friends with nobodies; don’t be the great somebody. Don’t hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody. Don’t insist on getting even; that’s not for you to do. “I’ll do the judging,” says God. “I’ll take care of it.” Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he’s thirsty, give him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don’t let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.”* (*The Message*, Romans 12, selected verses)

Do no Harm.

Seems simple enough, right? Living into the way of Christ, living a gospel life, is not a matter of avoiding all anger, or disagreement or conflict, as if that is even possible. It’s how we will navigate anger, disagreement, and conflict that matters. Wesley believed that Jesus is our example here and the first thing we learn from him is to do no harm. “When our words and actions are guided by this first simple rule, we have time and space to think about the consequences before a word is spoken or an action taken.”(Job, 23-24) When we seek to do no harm our words and actions become a means for building up rather than tearing down Wesley offered some examples of what doing no harm meant. He included practices like:

* Not taking the name of God in vain.
* Not holding, buying, or selling slaves.
* Not fighting, quarreling, or brawling.
* Doing things to others we would not want them to do to us.
* Doing what we know is not for the glory of God.
* Laying up treasures on earth.

We all are aware of conflicted situations, places where disagreement seems to be the norm. We all know how hard it can be to form healthy community, to share life together. The way forward Wesley says, is to follow Christ’s example and first Do no Harm. We are called to live differently, to set a different example, to play by different rules. This means a couple of things to me, when we encounter conflict or people with whom we disagree as we try and share life together in community and offer an alternative witness to the world, if we follow Jesus and do no harm we “…can no longer gossip about the conflict. That includes not talking about things we have no firsthand knowledge of and not entertaining those conversations even if we aren’t active participants. Doing no harm means we can no longer speak disparagingly about those with whom we disagree. It means we can’t manipulate the facts to bolster our position. We have to speak the truth in love. And we certainly can’t diminish those who do not agree with us, and we must honor every person as a child of God, because every person is made in God’s image.”

This doing no harm got Jesus into trouble all the time with the good religious folks of his day. He refused to follow their rules of engagement which often included judging, and shaming, and ridiculing those with whom they disagreed. He refused to play the insider/outsider game by doing no harm to those who were on the margins of the faith community. Instead, he ate with sinners, and spent time in the presence with women and those who were labeled unclean, he listened far more than he ever spoke, and he saved his harshest criticism for people like you and me, people on the inside of the faith community. Do no Harm. It means, “I will guard my lips, my mind, and my heart so that my words and my actions will not disparage, injure, or wound another child of God.”(Job, 24) I will first do no harm, not to keep quiet and get along, not to avoid the difficult truth, but as a way of building up the church and furthering the work of God’s Kingdom so that my words and actions will not become a stumbling block in my neighbor’s journey of faith.

As Bishop Rueben Job reminds us, this is not easy. “It requires a radical trust in God’s presence, power, wisdom, and guidance, and a radical obedience to God’s leadership. Practicing our faith and trying to live in an alternative way before the world requires our deepest resolve, our greatest faith, our unwavering trust, and a very, very large measure of God’s grace. Remember that Jesus said, “Apart from me you cannot do this, but if you abide in me you will bear much fruit.”

More and more these days one of the reasons I believe that we struggle so mightily to do no harm and that we seem so conflicted and divided is that we have allowed “…our loyalty to an ideological view to outweigh our loyalty to Jesus Christ.”(Job, 27) This is fueled when live in silos and we only talk with or listen to people who already agree with us. Last week Laura reminded us of our vision statement and the core values and measures we hope are guiding our life together.

One of those measures that I find to be a hopeful corrective to this problem is, “Have I walked with someone not like me?” It’s not a bad idea from time to time to sit down and have coffee with someone with whom you fundamentally disagree. You may not change each other’s mind. But you just might discover that the one you believed to be an enemy is actually a brother or sister in Christ.

Friends, there is a better way than all the craziness we see around us. There is a way made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. The world needs this counter witness. It needs to see the possibility of an alternative way of ordering life together. It’s the way of loving others as Christ has loved us. Now notice, I didn’t say liking others or agreeing with others, I said loving others the way Christ has loved us, by caring enough about our neighbor to first do no harm.

Jesus makes that possible. The One who had every right to do harm to so many around him. The One who was unjustly accused, railroaded, lied about, spat upon, beaten, murdered on a tree, when he encountered his worst enemies he did no harm. And he calls you and me to go and do likewise. Even better, he promises to be right there with us, all the way. Amen.