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A summertime saunter with God, imagine it. What would strolling with God on a lazy summer evening look like? what images are involved, what colors and what conversation would be had? (pause)

Today we begin a 3-part series that outlines how we might saunter with God. Each week we'll look at one of *Three Simple Rules* as discussed by Rueben P. Job in his book of the same name.

Bishop Job distilled John Wesley's General Rules into three simple statements: Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. Wesley wrote his General Rules to provide guidance for the early Methodists, but his main points remain timely today.

This week, we look at the first rule: "do no harm." It is so elementary that the Hippocratic Oath from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE includes the same advice "I will keep [the sick] from harm and injustice."

Though this concept is neither new nor novel, Job insists that, "when practiced, it works wonders in transforming the world around us" (21). He says that

To do no harm is a proactive response to all that is evil—all that is damaging and destructive to humankind and God's good creation, and therefore, ultimately, to us. (30) ...To do no harm means that I will be on guard so that all my actions and even my silence will not add injury to another of God's children or to any part of God's creation. (31)

Wesley said that we should begin with spiritual practices:

By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced. - BOD, P103

To restate "do no harm" positively is to see harm where others have been blind or indifferent, and to speak up for love, with love.

Wesley had a discerning eye. More than a hundred years before the US Civil War, Wesley saw how slavery denigrated the dignity of fellow human beings. He had the courage write sermons addressed to slaveholders, warning them of their responsibility before God not to harm God's children. He also encouraged Methodists not to purchase sugar, because he understood that the sugar sold in England had been manufactured by unconscionable slave labor.

As I read *The Three Simple Rules* again, I was surprised by how well this fits one of the "most generally practiced evils" of our society today: racism. I was also confronted with my own silence. Where silence will add injury to another of God's children, Job says, I am not given the option to remain voiceless, lest I do harm.

Wesley's keen insight was that the most pervasive and caustic of sins are those which are most generally practiced, those which seem normal, just the way things are and always will be. Apathy and silence aren't for Wesleyan Christians.

You may recall that MLK's famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was written in response to a letter that had been penned by a coalition of white clergy. They condemned King for inciting hatred and violence and urged people to be moderate. King was grieved. "I felt that the white ministers, priests, and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies." he wrote, "Instead, some have been outright opponents...all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows."

It takes courage to do no harm in a world that's not aligned with God's ways.

The prophets Jeremiah and Micah whom we heard from today were courageous in confronting evils that no one had eyes to see. Jeremiah declares that God didn't give commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices at Siani, but instead that God wanted them to walk in God's ways so that they could flourish. But the evil most generally practiced in their day was that of sacrifice, and they stubbornly kept to these tribal traditions, looking, says Jeremiah, backward instead of forward. Looking forward, God would offer Godself as a perfect and final sacrifice. God has always been less concerned about religious rituals than with people's walking along God's sacred paths—that is, living, acting, doing, and speaking, in ways that reflect the goodness and love of our Creator.

If we are to walk in God's ways, we must ask for eyes to see and the courage to speak out in love.

Does not being racist implicitly mean we are not doing harm? Or does the commitment to do no harm require us to do something?

According to research by multiple universities including Harvard, we in the US are actually socialized to have an implicit bias toward the unconscious association of goodness, purity, and positive traits with whiteness and of badness, filth, and negative traits with darker skin pigmentation. So, our brothers and sisters of color have always heard negative messages about their own worth, while so-called 'white' children grow up with an extra undergirding of their sense of self-worth. General negative regard skews nearly every interaction for people of color.

These implicit biases are so subtle an evil that they have felt 'normal' for generations, and yet, the consequences of this pervasive evil are glaringly obvious on a systemic level. Just one example from history is the near exclusion of black veterans from the benefits of the GI Bill following WWII. A staggering fact to me is that in New York, 66,900 white veterans received mortgages supported by the GI Bill while a mere 100 black veterans obtained the same privilege, which impacted future generations, too.

Can we make our Christian claim that *all people* are God's beloved, valuable children, while we leave our own implicit biases untouched or while we remain silent rather than speaking up to affirm the worth of our brothers and sisters of color?

While our colored brothers and sisters are suffering from discrimination not simply as individuals but as a whole in all aspects of our society, it is harmful for me to remain silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stain-glassed windows of this church. I must not harm with my silence and inaction. I must share what I have eyes to see, and speak on the side of love in support of people of color, and I must actively resist participating in the evils of racism by working to dismantle the implicit biases I grew up with. Toward that end, I hope many here today will join me in signing up for the next White People Challenging Racism class.

I realize that some of what I said might rub some of you the wrong way. Let's talk more later. In our talk, whether it is together with me or just amongst ourselves, let us not forget to do no harm.

To do no harm is to see evil, especially that which is most common, and to call it out, and speaking up in love, to resist that evil and to stand on the side of Love. As we navigate life together, dealing with our differences provides ample practice for doing no harm. To live in Christian community we must commit to this first simple rule. "A commitment to doing no harm can change the entire climate in which conflict is happening," says Job, "because we can no longer gossip about the conflict, speak disparagingly about those involved in the conflict, manipulate facts of the conflict, or diminish those with whom we disagree, but instead we honor each person as a child of God. He says we must guard not only our lips but our minds and hearts so that we do not belittle or wound one another.

When we allow ourselves to do harm, it isn't because this first rule is complex but because it is demanding. Laying down our verbal and social weapons requires self-discipline and a radical trust in God. Sometimes we stray into doing harm because we have become more committed to a cause, ideology, or theology, than to our relationship with God. To walk humbly with our God is to recognize that "God's way could be different than our own" (25) and to keep our engagement with God as our top priority. Job cautions that choosing to "abandon the way of the world and follow the way of Jesus is a bold move" which "requires honest, careful, and prayerful consideration" (25).

Today, we are challenged to increase both our intentionality and level of commitment to do no harm.

I know that we have the capacity to do this as a church community. I have seen members of this church discuss what to do about matters on which they disagree—passionately, and in the midst of the tension, I have seen people prioritize their relationships over their own 'rightness.' So, today, let us say together with Reuben P. Job that:

[Like] John Wesley and those in the early Methodist movement before me, I too will determine every day that my life will always be invested in the effort to bring healing instead of hurt; wholeness instead of division; and harmony with the ways of Jesus rather than with the ways of the world.

So, this week, as we walk with God, may we go forward and not backward, may we hear and heed God's voice so that we can follow paths that lead to mutual flourishing.

While walking in God's way requires courage and chutzpah, Job reminds us that "deep in the silence of our hearts, we know ...we do know that following Jesus is the best and only way to live fully and faithfully, ...to live a peaceful, joyful, fruitful life."(26)

With God's help, we can see harm and speak up against it, with love, and for Love's sake. Amen.

