



The People of God Who Do No Harm

Proverbs 3:1-8, 27-32

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Good morning, and Happy Easter!

I know, I know, we celebrated Easter last week ... but Easter is not a day. Easter is a season! The season of Easter begins on the Sunday following Jesus' crucifixion, when the women found that the tomb was empty, and it goes all the way through Jesus' ascension. Today is, in churchy terms, the "Second Sunday of Easter." So, we will continue to give thanks to God for the resurrection of Christ and the promise of new life!

In the midst of this year's Easter season, the United Methodist Church will be convening a gathering of the General Conference. The General Conference will be in session from April 23 through May 3, and will be meeting in Charlotte, NC. For those who are unaware of our structure in the United Methodist Church, the General Conference is kind of like the Methodist Pope – it is the only entity that can speak authoritatively on behalf of the entire denomination. Though, instead of a single person, the General Conference (at least this year) is comprised of 862 delegates, who have been elected by their Central and Annual Conference around the globe. The breakdown of delegates is determined in the same way the US census helps determine House Reps. For this General Conference, 55% of the delegates are from the United States, 32% are from Africa, 6% are from the Philippines, and 4.5% are from Europe. Half of the delegates are laity; half are clergy.

The General Conference meets to discuss the theological, practical, financial, social, and administrative life of the Church. We have, unsurprisingly, a very methodical process of receiving petitions, and then acting on those petitions through the making of motions and amendments, which might alter or edit our United Methodist Book of Discipline, which outlines the foundational tenants and general polity of our denomination.

I will be offering some thoughts on the General Conference in the weekly email over the coming weeks to make sure you are aware of the discussions being held, and to keep you up-to-date on the decisions that are made at the General Conference, especially those that may affect our local ministry. I invite you to be in prayer for the 862 delegates of the General Conference, for the 59 Bishops who will be presiding over the Conference, and for the witness and ministry of the United Methodist Church.

In light of the General Conference taking place, I thought it would be helpful for us to spend a few weeks looking at what it means to be United Methodists. What does it mean for us as a local church, and what does it mean for us as individual participants and members of a United

Methodist Church. To structure my thoughts for these coming few weeks, I'm going to use the General Rules of the Methodist Church. These rules were first published by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in 1743, and they were adopted as continuing guidelines by the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church upon its founding in 1784. The three rules come across as being somewhat simple. They are: do no harm, do good, and attend the ordinances of God.

Do no harm. Do good. And attend the ordinances of God.

Though they sound simple, there's a lot more depth to these three rules than you might first imagine. So, let's dive in. This morning, we're going to look at the first of the three rules: Do no harm.

When we first consider what it means to do no harm, we often begin with the tangible, knee-jerk type imaginations of the rule. We might think simplistically, like, don't run someone over with your car. That would be harmful, and we shouldn't do it. We might also extend the rule to cover lesser infractions – you know, things that wouldn't necessarily lead to your arrest and conviction as a felon for attempted murder. Perhaps there are more simplistic convictions for "do no harm," like: don't flip someone the bird; don't use racial slurs; don't steal, cheat, or deceive; don't commit adultery (we could utilize most of the ten commandments here); or perhaps, don't be a bully.

All of these fall within the framework of the rule, but the rule isn't just an invitation to "passive avoidance of intentionally doing harm to another person."¹ There's something deeper that is intended in this rule. To help shape our thoughts on this first rule, let's look at Proverbs 3.

In the Biblical canon, the Proverbs offer guidance for practical, godly living. They are ascribed to King Solomon, and some of his own students. In general, they teach us to live "wisely," following the teachings and commandments of God. We find this invitation to live wisely offered in the start of chapter 3.

Verse 1 begins, "My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments." Verse 3 continues, "Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them round your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart." Verse 5 further offers, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

You can hear in these opening verses the invitation of the author for his student to learn the teachings of Biblical faithfulness. But the wisdom, which is being offered, is not simply a matter of head knowledge. You can hear the repeated invitation that this wisdom should be instilled upon the individual's heart – the very core of their being. "Let your heart keep my commands ... write them on the tablet of your heart ... trust in the Lord with all your heart." The call to understand and know God and the will of God is a life-changing endeavor, which alters the very core of our personhood.

Remember, for those of the ancient Near-East, the heart was not simply the place of emotion, it was the place of *all* being. It was the place of knowledge and the place of passion; the place of one's core existence and the place in which one's thoughts, actions, words, and deeds originated.

The invitation to receive this knowledge, to embrace this wisdom in our very core, also requires an acknowledgement that the wisdom of God and God's ways is beyond our personal capacity to imagine for ourselves. We cannot rely on our own insight, but instead, we must shift our way of human understanding to embrace the vision and knowledge of the Lord.

In this opening invitation by the Proverb to understand the Wisdom of God, we can begin to see that the invitation to "do no harm" is not quite as simple as we might first imagine. We can't rely on human wisdom to avoid harm, because a lot of human ways elicit harm. We have to be filled with a greater intentionality and a greater knowledge, truly, the wisdom of God, to really practice doing no harm.

If we pick back up in Proverbs 3:27, we begin to understand the challenge of this invitation, and it becomes clear why such an invitation to "do no harm" is so hard for us with the limits of human wisdom.

Starting in verse 27, we find that the author offers us five prohibitions that all reference one's neighbor. As it is speaking of life in community, the first and most important piece of the scripture is the invitation to look beyond the end of our own noses when considering what it means to do no harm. We, humanity, we have a tendency to focus on ourselves. We like to think that personal growth, success, personal salvation, and isolated wealth is the key to a fruitful and faithful life. In that state of mind, we often only focus on harm when **we** can see that harm has been caused.

If we don't feel the harm – if we don't see the harm – if we don't think what happened was harmful, we write it off as being just a mere inconvenience. We often blame the other person for being too sensitive. We are so focused on centering how we feel when something happens, that we write off the harm that others feel as if we have no responsibility for it. There are plenty of examples of this kind of thinking in human history, whether it be slavery or genocide. But there are far more lesser harms that happen all the time without us giving any thought to how our words, actions, and engagement in society affect the lives, livelihood, and wellbeing of others.

The Proverbs invite us to shift that way of thinking. That kind of thinking – the thinking that centers ourselves ... the thinking that stipulates the world must revolve around our personal orbit ... that is human wisdom, not divine wisdom. And very specifically, the teacher here in Proverbs is inviting us as students of the Holy Word to reframe our understanding of wisdom, and to turn from our personal thoughts to the thoughts of the Lord ... even deeper, to accept the wisdom of the Lord at the core of our being.

Verse 27 offers the first prohibition, “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.” The second prohibition, in verse 28, is like it, “Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again; tomorrow I will give it’ – when you have it with you.”

These first two prohibitions claim that it is doing harm to your neighbor when you fail to do good to them, specifically when it is in your capacity to do good to them. These are passive-aggressive actions, that say it is doing harm when we fail to do the good that we are capable of doing.

To understand why this is doing harm requires a shift in our human wisdom. Usually in such situations, our focus is on what right or responsibility *we have*, as the person who is being asked for help or support. We like to think that we have the right to choose whether we want to help or not. But the wisdom that is being taught in Proverbs invites us to shift our focus away from ourselves and onto our neighbor. The divine wisdom behind these first two prohibitions claims that your neighbor has a God-given right to receive good, more than you have to withhold good. God has created us in the image of God, which desires the good of all of humanity. So by withholding good from a neighbor, you are not only denying them the good of God, but you are denying the image of God in which you were created.

To do no harm, we must not avoid doing good when good is in our capacity.

Picking up in verse 29, we read the next two prohibitions, “Do not plan harm against your neighbor who lives trustingly beside you. Do not quarrel with anyone without cause, when no harm has been done to you.”

We have moved from harm by *omission* to harm by *commission*. These two prohibitions are perhaps the kind we think of first when we hear the rule to “do no harm.” They invite us to avoid actively planning harm against our neighbors or picking fights with them.

To do no harm, we must, well, do no harm. We must not commit harmful acts.

Finally, in verse 31, our final prohibition stipulates, “Do not envy the violent and do not choose any of their ways; for the perverse are an abomination to the Lord, but the upright are in his confidence.”

This final prohibition says that it is harmful to make common cause with those who are doing harm, whether we are supporting them by our words, thoughts, or deeds. To live faithfully according to this final prohibition, we must again look at the actions of others with the wisdom of God. Are we supporting people who are living according to the divine will, or is the work we are supporting, or envying, or choosing to accept for ourselves causing harm to others? Are we supporting practices and policies that are hurting God’s beloved creation? Are we electing and voting for individuals whose words and deeds are degrading of God’s beloved humanity? Are we investing in and supporting companies who are actively engaged in practices and policies that

go against Divine Wisdom? Are we aligning ourselves with God’s intentions for the world, or are we giving in to the corruption of human desire, power, and the limited and selfish ways of human wisdom?

The first of our general rules, to Do No Harm, is not simply a child’s invitation to “keep your hands to yourself.” In fact, the rule, if anything, is an invitation to stop focusing so much on yourself. “Not doing harm is about living and expressing what it means to live in the kingdom of God ... the place of fellowship and connection.”ⁱⁱ It’s an invitation to think more wholistically about how we interact in the world, for anytime harm is done to anyone, the whole of the community suffers.

To do no harm from a place of faithfulness requires a more intentional focus on issues of equity and justice. For we cannot be living according to the wisdom of God if we, the people of God, think that the only thing that matters in spirituality is our personal relationship with God. What the Proverbs tell us is that one cannot be faithful to God without inheriting the wisdom of God, and the wisdom of God is not individually focused – it is, always has been, and always will be focused on the health, the well-being, and the salvation of humanity and creation on the whole. To do no harm invites us to claim that wholistic approach to our way of living as a people of faith, such that God’s will might be done for all of the earth just as it is in heaven.

We, as a people of the Christian faith, specifically in the United Methodist tradition, we are invited to understand these three rules to help guide our faith. The first of these is this: Do No Harm. May God lead us in such faithfulness, and impart upon us divine wisdom, that we might live faithfully as Easter people, who proclaim the glory and promise of new life for all of God’s created. Amen.

ⁱ Derek Weber. “#BeUMC Week 1: The People of God Who Do No Harm.” umcdiscipleship.org

ⁱⁱ Weber.