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Three Simple Rules: Do No Harm

This morning is the first in a three-part sermon series in what are often called John Wesley's Three Simple Rules, or the Three General Rules. There's a United Methodist Bishop named Rueben Job who wrote a book on these three rules, and he summarized them like this... "Do no harm, Do Good, and Stay in Love with God." In a quick church history recap, John Wesley was the founder of what we know of today as the United Methodist church... back in the 1800's he was part of the church renewal movement in England. He wanted to breathe life back into the Anglican Church, so he started United Societies, what we would call today a Small Group Ministry. He first wrote about these three rules in the 1740's, as he was describing what he wanted these societies to be about and how he envisioned them living out their faith. These United Societies met weekly to pray together, to encourage each other, and to take care of one another so TOGETHER, they could grow in their faith.

I want to focus today on what it might mean to do no harm. I know it might sound simple, but in fact it's not simple at all. It is, in fact, impossible to live without doing SOME harm to some one or something. Just by staying alive we are using resources that someone else might need... we are eating something that was once alive itself. And then, there are the hundreds of ways we can harm one another in our interactions, often without intending to... often without even knowing it. We might say or do something with pure intentions, but unknowingly strike a nerve for someone else, simply because of something they are going through and working out in their lives. I heard a fabulous saying this week that keeps us mindful of the unintentional harm that is always a possibility... "Remember that everyone you meet is in the midst of a great struggle." And then there are those times when we intentionally hurt others, often because we are acting out of a place of hurt. It's unfortunately too true that "hurt people hurt people." That the bullied often becomes the bully, the abused transitions into the abuser. Unresolved and unprocessed feelings of pain and loss of power can result in lashing out at others, harming any and all in our wake.

So how do we stop that seemingly endless cycle... how do we lift one another up, rather than tearing down creation and the communities that we form.

The scripture passage that we just heard from Paul's letter to the Romans, was written to two groups of people, both of whom were Christian, but who often harmed one another. In its early years, Christianity was a Jewish movement made up of the people who believed that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah foretold in the scriptures. But around the year 42, the emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome... and many historians believed that he was trying to worsen the conflict, to fan the flames between traditional Jews and Christians, divide and conquer. After Claudius died, around the time Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome, the emperor Nero allowed Jews to return to the city, and by then Christianity had come to include both Jews and Gentiles. So now, this new religion included these two groups who both had reason to hate and mistrust and fear the other, each of whom could be persecuted by the Roman government.... I cannot imagine a better way to poison a community. Split it into factions that dislike and distrust each other. Fan the flames of hatred between them. Keep them off balance, keep them afraid, keep them feeling powerless. That's who Paul is writing to. People so divided that they don't even know if they WANT to be unified. Far too fearful and obsessed with their divisions to even know how to join together, or if they even wanted to.

Sound familiar? There is so much division in our world today... both in and out of the church. Our nation is divided along political lines, our church is divided by our beliefs about human sexuality, our global society is divided by power imbalances. Into all this division, fear and hatred, Paul's letter to the Romans speaks a word of peace and hope to us. Within it, I hear a message to us even today... You of different skin colors and ethnicities, and languages, and political persuasions, and social positions... you are no longer divided by the powers that seek to divide you. God has called you to something far greater than your cultural and political differences would allow. The community who follow the Christ is the body of people who chooses to bless its enemies, who refuses to return evil for evil, who refuses to take vengeance upon those who oppose them. And as we practice this way of life, we are transformed by God and God's world is transformed.

I believe that Paul saw something beautifully clear. What he saw is that the way we get overcome by evil, the way evil wins is by making us into itself, and if we want to do no harm, we have to find some way to stop passing along the harm that is done to us. Somehow, we have to find the strength to say, "I choose to not hurt you back."

There's a New Testament scholar named Walter Wink that wrote about this in a book called, "Engaging the Powers." Wink says, "when we fall into the trap of division and fear, when we vilify others, and try to win at all costs... a terrible thing happens to us, and that terrible thing is that we become what we hate. Maybe not all the time, maybe not all the way, but the sickness begins to take hold. It's what the Emperor Claudius was counting on... it's what any fear-based leadership counts on when it is trying to consolidate and hold power.

Back in the late '80s there was a documentary film released on the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, it's based on a book by David Shipler called "Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land." And in that documentary, Shipler quotes a taxi driver who said to him in a trip across Jerusalem, "We must beat the Arabs on the head. We must beat them and beat them and beat them until they stop hating us." Evil wins by making us into itself. We become what we hate. What Paul saw was that it doesn't have to happen that way.

During the 8-year period of massacres and bloodshed that has come to be known as the Balkan conflict. Serbian forces had laid siege to the city of Srebrenitza, the Serbs did not even try to spare civilians, they did not try to avoid non-military targets, they were just trying to kill every living thing and level every building in the city. The siege had gone on for weeks, and at the end, when the entire city was reduced to rubble, the UN finally been able to secure safe passage for the few civilians that were left, and as the survivors of the bombing were crawling out of the rubble, one of the women approached a radio reporter who was there with the UN troops. The small group that she was with had been huddled in the dark in an underground shelter for weeks, waiting for the next bomb with almost nothing to eat and no idea if they were going to live even another few minutes. And she walked up to the reporter with the microphone and she said, I want you to tell them, "They did not win! Because they did not make us into animals. We will never hate them in the way they hate us." Somehow in that moment she had refused to pass on the harm that had been done to her.

Learning to do no harm is not something that happens instantly. It is the work of years of patience and prayer and living in community together and allowing God to transform us, but we start by choosing, as much as we can, simply to not return hurt for hurt, evil for evil. We practice, we pray, we get stronger, and as God works in us, we get better at it over time.

I don't think this that this section of the book of Romans is meant to be instructions, a checklist about how to be a nice person. I think what Paul is laying out for us here is a spiritual practice that allows God to change us over time, if we will engage it seriously. And it begins when we stop investing in being winning, in being right. Instead, engage in these simple practices of humility, of serving others, of listening deeply, of invest in the wellbeing of others. In those practices, over time, God will show us who we truly are, and we'll be different, and the world around us will be different.