

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 17, 2008
08.17 General Rule #1—Do No Harm

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 (*Old Testament lection for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost*)
For further background read Genesis 37:1-50:26.

Where were we? Oh yes, we had just finished talking about the Wesley brothers' one condition for membership in the Methodist Societies. Does anyone remember what it is? (*Those at the 10:45 a.m. worship in Washington didn't hear it, of course, but they can find it on the website at www.umc-washington.org.*)

“...a desire to flee from the wrath to come, & to be saved from our sins.”
(*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004, page 48*)

This “wrath to come,” as we talked of it last week, is not what we might expect. It is not a wrath that pursues from behind but rather one that meets us on the road ahead. The only way to flee it is actually to meet it (i.e., to own up to & face the consequences of our own sin & faithlessness without offering up excuses or otherwise attempting to defend ourselves). It means holding on to God, come what may.

We tend to resist this understanding (at least I do). It is, after all, counterintuitive. We like to think of our flight as being away from something that pursues after us. We flee from sin. We flee from unrighteousness & injustice. We flee from worldliness & all ungodliness. We're familiar with that. We're comfortable with it.

I have three problems with that approach. First, to flee from something that pursues after us is eventually to get caught. Why? Because we're focused on that from which we're fleeing, not upon where we're heading. In a game of tag even the best tire sooner or later—and get caught. In a foot race, looking back at the competition means slowing down—and getting caught. (*Think tortoise & hare. Think Penelope Pitstop & Dick Dastardly. Why is it that he never wins the race when he spends most of his time so far out in front?*) In football, have you ever noticed that the surest way to lose is to play not to? Go for it on 4th & 1, even early in the game & in your own territory. Odds are, you'll win. (David Roemer, economist at U. of California; *Homiletics*, 8/3/2008)

Second, to flee from something that pursues us from behind is to be distracted from what we might run into up ahead. I think it was late in 1972, my older brother Terry & I were heading out to collect the money for our paper route. It was dark, we had just crossed the highway & were walking past the 9th Avenue United Methodist Church when two older boys tried to rob us. Terry heaved the bank pouch up into a tree, then took off running across the street & around the church. They took off after him. I retrieved the pouch & took off in the opposite direction, all the time looking to make sure they weren't coming back... & ran smack dab into the next tree. Don't laugh! It hurt! And we still had to go do the collections, black eye, scraped face, limping & all! You'd think I'd have learned my lesson from that experience, but no! In 1995 while driving a carload of youth to Worlds of Fun, I looked back to check my blind spot before merging into heavy traffic... & so didn't see the cars in front of me hit the brakes. From 50 to 5 mph in just a few seconds! I got down to 15 before I met them. My Buick LeSabre never recovered. (Neither did my hope of becoming their youth pastor!)

What does this have to do with God? Do you remember that commandment about not taking God's name in vain? Do you know what lies behind it? The ancients believed that, if you spoke God's name, God just might show up. If you didn't mean it when you said it, if you weren't looking for God when God arrived..., *not good!* They took precautions to make sure that didn't happen. They used a different word when they saw the name written. They changed the vowels so that even if you accidentally tried to say it you would say it wrong. You do not want to mess with God.

The third problem is that sin, unrighteousness & all that stuff that pursues us from behind is not "the wrath to come." They simply bring it on. The wrath belongs to God who waits before us. But we don't want to flee from God. We want to run to God—& that's the key. It's counterintuitive, but to run to God is to flee from the wrath of God & be saved from our sins.

That's what Jacob found out on the other side of the river Jabbok in last week's text. Caught between a rock & a hard place, with nowhere left to flee, he wrestled with God. He knew that he could not win & he knew that to hold on to God past daybreak would be to face the wrath to come. Yet, though it would cost him everything, including his life, he would not let go. When morning broke, instead of wrath he encountered mercy, love & grace. He fled from the wrath by meeting it face to face & finding love in its place.

(An important sidebar:) Last week we asked the question, "Why are we here?" If it's to be seen & to make contacts, to grow your business or professional life, or because you want to hear a gospel of easy blessings, soft comforts & wish fulfillment, well... you *are* welcome here because everyone is. But you'd probably be more comfortable somewhere else. The Wesleys were not about prosperity—& neither are we. They were about holding on to God. I gotta say, there are days, months, even years when we're not winning this thing. We're with Jacob on the other side of the river Jabbok & at best we're holding on. But that's okay because the gospel message is not a promise of fame & fortune. It's the promise that God loves you. And if you find yourself today on the other side of the river Jabbok, let me simply say, "Holding on is worth it." (*And you are most welcome in this place!*)

But the Wesleys did not believe that trusting in God's grace & holding on were the end of the matter. They dared to suggest that if we do indeed desire to flee from the wrath to come & to be saved from our sins, there are certain evidences we will give to that effect. Think of them as things we can do that help to strengthen us as we hold on. These are the General Rules. Today we will learn & begin to practice the first of them:

"First: by doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind." (*The Book of Discipline*, page 48)

What do we mean by this? Consider the story we just read of Joseph & his family as one of the best, most real & human of examples I can think to offer.

Joseph was... obnoxious. Let's be honest, if we had a brother who...

...tattled on us for every little thing we did wrong,

...kept on telling us how he was going to rule over us all, even mom & dad,

...was so obviously preferred by dad—the coat of many colors was just the tip...

...how would we feel? What might we do?

His brothers hated him & conspired to kill him when no one else was around to see it. All except for Reuben. Oh, make no mistake, he hated him too. But he didn't want him dead. He persuaded his brothers not to shed his blood. He allowed them to believe that it was simply

to avoid bloodguilt—don't shed Joseph's blood, just throw him stripped to his skivvies into a pit & let him die there on his own—with the intention of later delivering Joseph from them.

Reuben desired to “do no harm.” There were things that were much more important to him than his hatred. His father was one. His conscience—God—was another. His love for his brother, even this brother whom he hated, was more important. I believe the same was true for Judah who persuaded his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery. It wasn't just about getting rid of him & turning a little profit. I have to believe Judah was motivated in part by a faint desire to do no harm. I have to believe it because of how the story turns....

But that's for next week. The first of the General Rules is as simple as that: “do no harm” & “avoid evil of every kind.” It's simple... but it's not easy. I remember making a vow in college, after noticing how my words hurt others (I had a rather potent & caustic wit), that I would never again use my tongue to wound another. Have I kept my vow without fail? By no means! I've failed more times than I can count. But I'm working on it, hoping to do better.

Which brings us to the question, “What do you want me to do this week, Preacher?”
(question asked of Bishop Blake by a Texas 6-year-old) I want us to practice this 1st of the General Rules—but not alone. Take each other's hands, hold one another accountable through the week & seek one another's help. Be obedient to one another in keeping this rule, “not for wrath but for conscience sake.” (Romans 13:5)

It is the Wesleyan—the Methodist—the *United* Methodist—way.
It's as simple as that.