

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
 August 24, 2008  
 08.24 General Rule #2—Do Good

Genesis 45:1-15 (*Old Testament lection for the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost*)  
 For further background read Genesis 37:1-50:26.

Who said, “I don’t care to belong to a club that accepts people like me as members”?  
 (<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/g/grouchomar128182.html>)

Groucho Marx. (Woody Allen later paraphrased Groucho’s “sentiment” saying, “I’d never want to belong to a club that would have anyone like me as a member.”  
 (<http://sergioleoneifr.blogspot.com/2007/07/mr-shoops-surfin-summer-school-mega.html>)) But it could just as easily have been anyone who resists getting too involved with the church.

Membership in the Methodist Societies—both becoming & continuing as members—is what we’ve been talking about these past two weeks. Sounds fascinating, right? Who would want to do that? Actually—& I firmly believe this—everyone. Here’s why: our lives aren’t working. Something’s messed up & deep down we know it has something to do with our relationship with God. We know that God is holy. We know that we are not. And we know that God cannot abide unholiness. We know that God’s is the club that would never have us as members, God’s is the wrath that so rightfully stands ready to condemn us. But we also know we would rather face that wrath than face one day more without God in it. We’re with Jacob on the other side of the river Jabbok, wrestling with God through the deepest & darkest of nights, desperately holding on with all that we have & then some.

We call this repentance: a turning away from what’s not working in our lives to embrace the One for whom we truly long. It’s a turning away from that which condemns us to face the One who has every right to condemn, only to find that the wrath we so richly deserve is not there. Rather, the face of God is filled with mercy, love & grace for us. This is the gospel, the good news: God loves us. God loves all of us. It is not an easy gospel. God can still be disappointed, angry & even harsh. It’s not a promise of a comfortable life where our every wish is fulfilled. It’s a promise of salvation, *of salve or healing*, from all our brokenness in our relationships with God & one another. Healing is not easy. Often healing hurts.

Membership in a Methodist Society is about more than just hearing the gospel—this news which is too good to be true. It’s about living it so that healing—the evangel, the reign of God in our midst—becomes real.

(At this point I’d like to remind everyone, if you’ve missed a sermon in this series you can find them online at [www.umcWASHINGTON.org](http://www.umcWASHINGTON.org). Just click on the link “John Wesley’s General Rules & Means of Grace” & you’ll find a link to each of the sermons preached to date.)

So, let’s review. John & Charles Wesley declared there is only one condition for membership in the Methodist Societies. Anyone remember what it is?

“...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*)

How do we do this? By facing the wrath. By holding on to God no matter the consequences &, in so doing, discovering the mercy, love & grace God has for each & for all of us—the very same mercy, love & grace God would have us practice.

Practice. There's the rub. This is the salvation the Church teaches but all too often fails to practice. The Wesleys practiced it. At our best, Methodists—along with every church & every denomination—practice it. We're going to practice it. Which brings us to the three General Rules. Anyone remember the first? We "should continue to evidence our desire for salvation,

"First: by doing no harm; by avoiding evil of every kind..."

The 1<sup>st</sup> Rule is very simple..., but it's not at all easy. When Reuben faced down his brothers as they planned to kill Joseph, he had to deal both with their peer pressure & his own feelings toward Joseph. Even then he didn't avoid the evil altogether, he only mitigated it. Doing no harm would have been easier (& likely more successful), if he'd had some help—a point not lost on the Wesleys. For them, keeping the General Rules is a thoroughly social endeavor, both in effect & in execution. We are to help, encourage & hold one another accountable for our actions—in the case of this 1<sup>st</sup> Rule, for not harming others. John & Charles were very "methodical" in their emphasis on this—which is why we're called "Methodists."

It is not enough, however, just to do no harm. Living the evangel means going beyond the mere avoidance of evil to...

"...doing good of every possible sort, & as far as possible, to all."

This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> General Rule. It's also very simple..., & not at all easy. And while it wouldn't be quite accurate to say that this rule simply states in positive terms what the 1<sup>st</sup> rule states in the negative, there is a dialectic between the two. To understand how they relate to one another, let us return to the story of Joseph & his family.

When we left them the brothers had just sold Joseph into slavery—which was better than killing him as they'd originally intended, but still not very good. They lied to their father Jacob & deprived him of his beloved son. They did violence to Joseph & deprived him of freedom, kinship, & the love they owed him.

Since that time a lot has happened with Joseph. He has risen in his master's (Potiphar's) house, only to be falsely accused by Potiphar's wife & thrown into prison. He's found favor with his guard, interpreted dreams & received promises, only to be left there for years. Finally, he has been freed by Pharaoh & placed over all of Egypt, gotten married & fathered children.

He might have forgotten his family of birth entirely if it hadn't been for the drought. They were starving & so came to Egypt to ask for food, not realizing they would be asking it from him, nor recognizing him once they saw him.

Payback time. He accused them of being spies, threw them all in jail, then came up with a better idea. He let nine of them go, holding only Simeon against the time when they would return with Benjamin, the youngest of them all & Joseph's only full brother. It took a while—Jacob wouldn't send him with them until finally there was no other choice. When they did return, Joseph received them, feasted with them, celebrated with them... & then accused Benjamin of stealing his silver goblet (which Joseph had planted in his sack).

I do not believe for one minute that Joseph has done all this simply to test them, to see if they had changed. He does it to rescue his youngest brother, knowing that by now he has taken Joseph's place in their father's heart & faces all the same peril Joseph had faced with their

brothers. He wishes them no harm. He will send them with the supplies they need. But he will never think of them again.

Until something unexpected happens. Judah speaks up. He offers himself in Benjamin's place. No, he's not being completely altruistic. He desires no harm to befall to his father, & no harm to befall Benjamin... but he also desires no harm to befall his own sons whom he has offered to Jacob as surety. In the process, however—in the process of “facing the wrath”—he does something good, something for all of them. With that one simple action, the dam bursts.

The walls come down. Joseph reveals himself to them... & is overcome by a desire to good—for his father, for his brothers & their families, for Pharaoh, for Egypt, & for all who will come. A desire to flee from the wrath to come (Judah is not just thinking of his kids, he & his brothers have been wracked with guilt all these years), & to do no harm, finds fruition in a desire overflowing to do good.

It's simple..., but it's not easy. It has taken these brothers years to get to this place. And when their father dies they still will not trust that they have arrived. They will lie to Joseph, tell him that Jacob asked them to beg his forgiveness, & offer themselves as slaves. But the forgiveness, the mercy, grace & love—the goodness—is real.

It is costly. Forgiveness does not come cheap, even when offered freely. Judah knows it—all of them know it—& they continue to pay the price every day, knowing that it's worth it.

There is a story in the “Animating Illustrations” from last week's *Homiletics*. It is said that once there was “a rice farmer who saved an entire village from destruction. From his hilltop farm he felt the quake and saw the distant ocean swiftly withdraw from the old shoreline, like some prodigious animal crouching back for a leap. He knew that the leap would be a tidal wave.

“In the valley below, he saw his neighbors working low fields that would soon be flooded. They must run quickly to his hilltop or they would all die. His rice barns were dry as tinder. So with a torch he set fire to his barns and soon the fire gong started ringing. His neighbors saw the smoke and rushed to help him. Then from their safe perch they saw the tidal wave wash over the fields they had just left. In a flash they knew not only who had saved them but what their salvation had cost their benefactor. They later erected a monument to his memory bearing the motto, ‘He gave us all he had, and gave gladly.’” (Knight, *Fredericksburg Bible Illustrator Supplements*. [thecorner-stone.org/zS-Sai.aspx](http://thecorner-stone.org/zS-Sai.aspx). Retrieved February 4, 2008.)

“Doing good of every possible sort, & as far as possible, to all” is exactly what Jesus has done for us. He knew the cost & paid it gladly.

“So,” you might ask, “what do you want me to do this week, Preacher?” (question asked of Bishop Blake by a Texas 6-year-old) Do the same... but don't do it alone. Encourage one another in doing good of every sort. There is something we have done in the past with youth that has always been very powerful. I have with me this morning pads of sticky notes. I want each person here to take ten of them home with you today &, over the course of the next week, pay attention to what others are doing around you. When you see them doing something good for someone else, write them an affirmation on one of the notes & stick it up where they will see it. You may say who it's from or leave it anonymous, it's your choice.

Encouraging one another. It is biblical. It is so Wesleyan. It is the Methodist—the *United Methodist*—way.

And it's as simple as that.