

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
 August 31, 2008
 08.31 General Rule #3—God’s Ordinances

Romans 12:1-21 (*Epistle lections for the 14th & 15th Sundays after Pentecost*)

We’ve been doing this for three weeks now, but if you’re like me you still need a reminder for what we’ve covered so far. So let’s not be coy or clever about it. Let’s just jump directly into the review.

We’ve been talking about membership in the early Methodist Societies—the one condition for becoming a member & the three General Rules for continuing as a member. That one condition 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 it. Through repentance. By turning away from our godlessness to face God without excuse, no matter the cost, knowing that to face the wrath we so richly deserve is still infinitely better than to face one day more without God.

Why do we do this? Because nothing in our world or in our lives works without God.

Where do we find the strength? In Jesus Christ—the same Jesus who faced the worst of our wrath—the same Jesus whom we had killed by hanging him upon a tree—the same Jesus who from that tree begged God’s forgiveness for us—the same Jesus whom the grave could not contain—the same Jesus who, filled with grace immeasurable, proclaims even now God’s love for us. We find the strength in this same Jesus who walks with us, who faces God with us.

And what do we discover as we face the wrath of God? We find God’s mercy, love & grace. We find our salvation. We find that we are healed.

That’s the condition for those who joined the early Methodist Societies. But for those who would continue as members, John & Charles Wesley expected that they would evidence their desire by keeping the General Rules. There were three of them, the first of which was...

“First: By doing no harm; by avoiding evil of every kind...” (Ibid.)

The rule was very simple but not at all easy. How do we do this? We do it together by encouraging & holding one another accountable in the keeping of the rule.

The second rule was...

“Secondly: By ...doing good of every possible sort, &, as far as possible, to all.” (Ibid.)

It was also very simple but not at all easy. How do we do this? Again, we do it together by encouraging & holding one another accountable in the keeping of the rule. The Wesleys were pretty intent & methodical on this togetherness stuff (that’s why we’re called “Methodists”—it started as an insult but soon caught on).

At this point, I should remind us that the one condition & the three General Rules have never been requirements for our salvation. They were requirements for those who would be members in the Methodist Societies. The reason for the Societies was a desire for something

more than just “being saved.” The Wesleys, along with all those who joined them, wanted to experience their salvation & be assured of it, to know God’s grace firsthand, to walk with Jesus & live evangelically. So tell me, what have the first few weeks of practicing this “living the evangel” been like for you? Specifically, what was it like this past week to be paying attention to one another, catching each other doing something good & affirming them for it? What has it been like to receive an affirmation?

Are you ready, then, for the third & final of the General Rules? The third rule was...

“Thirdly: By attending upon all the ordinances of God.” (Ibid.)

What the blazes are you talkin’ ‘bout, Preacher???!

No one uses language like that any more unless they’re talking about local (esp. traffic) laws, do they? So what did the Wesleys mean by “the ordinances of God”? Ordinances are things that are “ordained” or commanded, in this case by God, that bring order to our world & to our lives. (Still thinkin’, “*Say what?*” I know I would be if I was sitting where you are listening to me say this.) Think of it this way: the “ordinances of God” are what we find commanded in scripture that are time-tested, time-proven means of growing in God’s grace. They are what people have done down through the millennia that have consistently helped them in their walk with God.

Maybe it would be easier if we just looked at the specific examples. Anyone with any idea what John & Charles were talking about when they referred to “the ordinances of God”? There are six of them:

- The public worship of God;
- The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded;
- Communion;
- Family & private prayer;
- Searching the Scriptures;
- Fasting or abstinence.

Why do the Wesleys expect us to do these things? It’s not just that these things help us to live evangelically & so demonstrate our desire for salvation. It’s that, without practicing these six things, two millennia of Christian experience have shown that our ability to live evangelically with mercy, love, hope & grace is seriously compromised if not lost altogether. Will God still love us if we don’t practice these things? Yes. Will God still yearn for us & work without ceasing for our salvation & healing...? Yes. Can we still believe in God through Jesus Christ, even if we ignore all six of these...? Yes.

Yes... but let us ask ourselves this: what is the state of our soul, of our relationship with God, our faith in the evangel, & our walk—our life—with Christ if we don’t do these things? If we’re honest with ourselves, I believe we will understand the wisdom borne of 2000 years of Christian experience. I believe this because I’ve experienced the difference. Have you?

But isn’t the church full of hypocrites? Wouldn’t it be better to stay away than not to live up to what we say we believe? Yes, the church is full of hypocrites. No, it’s not better to stay away. As one of those hypocrites myself, I guarantee you that being here is precisely where I need to be if I’m ever going to get better, if I’m ever going to move forward on this path toward Christian perfection, if I’m ever going to grow in the mercy, love & grace of Jesus Christ. I need to be here with you that I might be encouraged on this journey.

Even so, why bother? If God loves us anyway, isn't that enough? Tell me this. Would we rather hear that God loves us... or know it? Would we rather sing the songs "Jesus Loves Me" & "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"... or feel it in our hearts? Would we rather theologize about the nature of God's reign in heaven... or work for God's will to be done here on earth, filled with the hope that comes from knowing that even now God's reign is real among us & we can live in it? Would we rather walk on our own waiting for God to find us... or walk with Jesus knowing that we have been found? Would we rather hear the Gospel... or experience it? Would we rather wait for the evangel... or live evangelically?

Which brings us to the subject of Labor Day & the work or vocation of the people we celebrate this weekend. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12 that God has gifted each of us, each one differently, for the good of all. One of our tasks as the Body of Christ is the discernment of vocations, to help us as individuals & as the Body of Christ to discover our gifts & the purpose & calling God has for us.

Have you ever known a farmer, a teacher, a banker or store owner, clerk, lawyer, politician, engineer, aide, nurse, doctor, homemaker, parent, child, student... for whom it was just a job, just a grade, just a paycheck? Conversely, have you ever known one of these for whom it's not just a job but a calling, a vocation, their life's work?

Martin Rutte tells the story of a senior vice-president of a large utility company who told him "that one of the roles of companies in the future will be to help employees discover their life purpose & to make sure that their work is consistent with & demanding of that purpose. 'Imagine what would happen,' he said, 'if you had a company in which all the people were doing their life's work. You would have more loyalty, more resilience, more creativity, more innovation, & a deeper sense of self-reliance, self-renewal & self-generation.'" *(Homiletics, quoting Martin Rutte, "Spirituality in the workplace," SoulfulLiving.com)*

Imagine what would happen in this church if we did the same... if we went forth from this place as the Body of Christ with a purpose... if the mercy, grace, hope & love of God were poured forth from this place into the world.

Part of the genius of the Methodist Movement is that it has never simply been a movement within the church but rather a movement living out from the church into the world & into our daily lives. And it's not just for clergy, not even in its early days. It has always been the work of the people, clergy & laity together. So what are your gifts? What is your work, your vocation, your life's calling? Shall we discern them together, that together we might employ our differing gifts out in the world & in our daily lives for the benefit & encouragement of all? John & Charles would be pleased if we did.

Now then, what comes next? Is that all there is to the one condition & the three General Rules? Is there nothing more? We have not yet covered what John Wesley called "the means of grace." Some of them are "the ordinances of God." They are expected of all & we ignore them at our peril. Others are practices of the church, some of which we will find more helpful than others. (Of course, the ones I find most helpful might not be the same as yours.) All of them, however, are "means of grace" that help us in varying degrees to "taste & see that God is good," to experience the Gospel, to live the evangel & share God's love. The means of grace are next.

In the meantime, "What do you want me to do this week, Preacher?" (question asked of Bishop Blake by a Texas 6-year-old) Continue with the affirmations from last week. If you've run out of sticky notes, grab another ten from my stash before you leave (or simply buy some more). Let us encourage one another in doing good that we might grow together in God's grace. Amen.