

Sermon 2019.10.20

Do All the Good

(John 15:5-8; sermon 3 of 4 in Reconciling series “The Methodist Way”)

1. The Methodist Way. This month we are talking about Jesus’s command from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:23-24 to be reconciled to one another before we go to the altar.

An area where our United Methodist denomination has been torn is on inclusion of LGBTQ people. Although our *Book of Discipline* says that ALL people are created in God’s image, are worthy of love, and are welcome in the church... it also says that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” (par. 161G).

At the last General Conference early in 2019, a slight majority of global Methodists voted to double-down on the incompatibility language, prohibit the ordination of gay pastors, and enact harsh penalties for pastors who performed same-sex marriages. For those of you who watched the live stream of GC2019... I’m sorry. You saw some of the most hateful language and behavior on both sides of the issue.

We have another worldwide General Conference coming up May 5-15, 2020 in the Twin Cities. Our own Jessica Gobel is a voting delegate from Wisconsin. We are all praying for reconciliation between the sides, but we also know there may be division or even schism.

As our church prepares for GC2020 and whatever may come out of it, we are going back to our Methodist roots and practicing reconciliation in our own pews. How can we love one another and live together, even when we disagree?

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, gave us some useful tools. First is our tradition of being a big tent church where people who love God may unite and worship together, even when they disagree on lesser points of doctrine. We also have the Quadrilateral, a four-fold tool for discerning God’s will using scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

And we have Wesley’s three General Rules for the people called Methodist: 1. Do no harm; 2. Do good; and 3. Stay in love with God. ;

2. Do good. This week we are going to expand on the second rule, “do good.” You see, John and Charles Wesley and the early Methodists were less interested in a dry and dogmatic religion than in a heartfelt, practical faith – love with its boots on, ready to go!



Big Tent



Three General Rules



Quadrilateral

1. The Methodist way.

1 Do no harm.

2 DO GOOD.

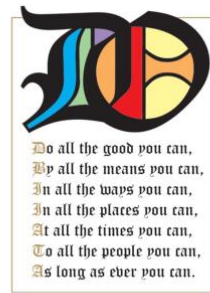
3 Stay in love with God.



2. Do good.

John Wesley **expanded the second rule into an entire system.** He's rather famous for it! Wesley's rule is printed on the front of the bulletin. Let's say it together:

**Do all the good you can /
By all the means you can /
In all the ways you can /
In all the places you can /
At all the times you can /
To all the people you can /
As long as every you can!**



2. Do good.

Consequently, the Methodists engaged in missions to an unusual degree – visiting the prisoners, caring for the sick, educating children, and helping to lift poor people out of poverty. John Wesley, an Oxford professor and Anglican priest, was by nature a scholarly man of books. But he experienced heart-warming faith when he put his knowledge and beliefs into action.

Consequently, the United Methodist Church has a heritage of vital mission and outreach. In Africa, we built the first pan-African college, Africa University, as a place where Methodists from across the continent can come to develop leadership skills and friendships, bringing peace to war-torn countries. Here in Wisconsin, we sponsor retirements home, adoption agencies, and college ministries.

Vital missional outreach – “serving in all the ways we can,” to quote our vision – is at the core of Onalaska UMC as well. We feed a hundred or more people at our community dinner every month. Our own Harvey Witzenberg helped organize the Coulee Hunger Walk last weekend, which raised over \$14,000 for La Crosse area food pantries. We send off *at least* three mission teams every year to do good work around the US and sometimes overseas.

3. The fruit test. This is entirely in keeping with Jesus' teaching. In our reading from John 15:5-8 today, Jesus uses the analogy of a grape vine. Jesus describes himself as the strong and vital vine, the roots and trunk that nourish and connect us. We are the branches, charged with bearing fruit. If we get cut off from Christ, we are dry and useless deadwood. But if we are connected firmly to Christ and one another, we bear bountiful fruit.



Fruitfulness is an essential test of Christian faith. Jesus says, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (15:8). This is how we know we are disciples, when we bear fruit. This is how the world knows we are disciples, when we bear fruit.

And this is how we know when God is doing a new thing – when it bears fruit. Remember the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, our four-part tool for interpretation and reinterpretation of faith and scripture? The four parts are scripture, tradition, reason, and *experience*. Experience is the fruit test – have we seen this faith bearing fruit?

The experience of fruitfulness is what led the early church to set aside the Old Testament scriptural bans on Gentiles, specifically the requirement for circumcision and dietary restrictions against pork.

Let me digress for a moment and share a joke... A Catholic priest, a Baptist pastor, and a Jewish rabbi were having an argument over whose religion was best at making new converts. So they decided to have a contest. This being the north woods of Wisconsin, they would each go out into the woods and try to convert a bear.

When they got together the next week, the Catholic priest was scratched and bruised. They asked, "What happened?" He said, "Well, I found a bear in the woods and began to tell him about all the blessed saints. The bear cuffed me and knocked me down, so I sprinkled him with holy water and taught him his rosary, and now we've got a good Catholic bear."

The Baptist pastor was next. His head was bandaged, and his arm was in a sling, and he needed crutches to walk. "What happened to you?" they asked. He said, "Well, I went out the in the wood an' found me a bar, and I began to preach at him what a sorry bar he was, and how he was goin' to hell unless he straightened up. That bar jumped on me and began to chewin' on me, and as we was wrasslin' around I flipped him into a creek and baptized him, and now we got us a good Baptist bar."

The Jewish rabbi was in bad shape. He was in a wheelchair, in a full body cast with an IV. They asked him, "What happened to you?" And the rabbi answered, "Well, in hindsight, circumcision wasn't the best place to start." ...

Sorry. Now, back to our regularly scheduled sermon: In Acts 10, the apostle Peter is sent by Jesus to a pagan household where they don't practice those hallmarks of correct Jews, circumcision and dietary purity. But when the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household – men, women, children, servants – hear about Jesus, they become believers and show clear evidence of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul has similar experiences with fruitful ministry among the Gentiles, and in Acts 15 Peter and Paul testify before the Jerusalem Council – the General Conference of its day – what they have seen. The Council, based on the fruit test of seeing the Holy Spirit at work, decides to set aside some of the Old Testament holiness laws and welcome the new Gentile Christians. (That's good news for us, by the way – just about everyone here this morning is a Gentile who enjoys a good ham sandwich!)

4. Biblical fruit. Last week we talked about the gotcha scriptures, the six verses out of 31,000+ in the bible that seem to prohibit homosexuality. They are listed in the flyer, “What does the Bible Say About LGBTQ Christians,” available in the lobby. Some of these verses are part of the Old Testament holiness codes that also contains sections set aside by the Jerusalem Council and others over the years. Many scholars and interpreters now believe that others of these verses are referring, not to loving monogamous same-sex marriage, but to sinful and harmful practices like child and sexual abuse, rape, idolatry, and promiscuity.



4. Biblical fruit.

But does the Bible contain any positive examples of LGBTQ people whose lives are fruit-bearing? Some scholars believe it does. For instance, King David, one of the heroes of the Old Testament, had a relationship with Jonathan early in his life. When Jonathan dies, David laments, “I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Samuel 1:26).

Or in Luke 7:1-10, a pagan centurion sends for Jesus to heal a beloved servant, saying, “Only speak the word, and let my servant be healed.” The Greek word *παῖς*, translated “servant,” was sometimes used of a male sexual companion. Jesus does not condemn the relationship but instead commends the centurion’s faith and heals the servant.

In Acts 8:26-40, the Holy Spirit sends Philip down the road to Gaza, where he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch and tells him about Jesus. Eunuchs, men who had been castrated for high government service, were seen as sexually “other” by Jews. Yet this eunuch comes to faith in Christ and says, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36). Philip gladly baptizes this social outcast who doesn’t fit the sexual norm.

These scriptures, by the way, are also listed in the “What does the Bible Say” flyer. In each case, the evidence of fruit – faith in Christ evidenced in word and deed – suggests that God has a place for LGBTQ people in the church.

5. Fruit in the family. That has been my experience, as well. Some of you know that my wife is the oldest of three sisters. They come from a long line of Lutherans and people of faith, and it has rubbed off. Anna-Lisa is a pastor in the United Methodist Church, her middle sister Alycia is a pastor in the Metropolitan Community Church, and the youngest sister is married to a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor serving in Hong Kong.



5. Fruit in the family.

When Alycia came out, it caused a family rift. The youngest sister condemned Alycia as a practicing homosexual based on the “gotcha” scriptures; Alycia responded by condemning the youngest sister as being too judgmental. For a few years, those sisters would not talk to each other – only to Anna-Lisa and I, the “Methodist middle.”

When Alycia married Judy, we went to the wedding in Texas. The youngest sister and her family did not. That hurt... When we all went to a family reunion at a Christian camp, Alycia and her family had to stay off-site. That hurt too... I am happy to say the sisters have since reconciled, setting aside their theological differences in favor of loving one another.

The **Metropolitan Community Church (or MCC)** that **Alycia serves was founded in 1968**, the same year as the United Methodist Church, as a specifically LGBTQ-affirming denomination. They are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, bearing fruit just like we are. Alycia has a fruitful ministry which God has blessed.



I have seen two beautiful things when we worship with Alycia in the MCC. One is that they really expand upon the time of joys, celebrating anniversaries. We watched loving couples announce their 5th, 10th, even 50th anniversaries. Especially when society has until very recently said that same-sex couples can't be married, these witnesses of faithful, fruitful, loving, life-long commitments made before God are amazing testimonies.

Another is that when the MCC serves communion, family groups come up together and serve each other. Spouses, grandparents, children – both heterosexual and homosexual couples – lovingly share the bread and cup, the body and blood of Christ, humbly serving each other. It is beautiful... and is the inspiration for our Maundy Thursday practice of family communion here at Onalaska UMC.

In 2010, Anna-Lisa and I took a family vacation to Colorado. Little did we realize that Alycia was going to be installed as the pastor of the Pikes Peak MCC while we were out there. During the installation service, visiting pastors were invited to lay hands on Alycia and pray for the blessing of the Holy Spirit in her ministry. It is one of the humbling highlights of my ministry that she allowed me – welcomed me! – a pastor from the not-quite-affirming United Methodist Church, to be part of that service.

6. Fruitful mission. God is clearly moving in the LGBTQ community, bearing fruit in faithful lives. But in the United Methodist Church, we haven't quite fully embraced this movement of the Holy Spirit. So, friends, how can we at Onalaska United Methodist Church welcome and acknowledge the fruitful ministry of our LGBTQ sisters and brothers?



6. Fruitful mission.

This reconciling process is part of the conversation. We already have gifted LGBTQ members amongst us who share their gifts as musicians, teachers, leaders, and, in the case of Ruth Hallstead, potential pastors. But they have not always felt safe being open about who

they are. We say that we “love all people unconditionally,” but do we really? Or is there an invisible asterisk on that statement that excludes LGBTQ people?

The Reconciling process is intended to help us think about how we love one another, even if we disagree with each other. Our goal is to have a church conference in the spring where all OUMC members can vote on a welcoming statement that specifically affirms that we love and welcome LGBTQ people in the life of the church. *That* would be truly welcoming.

A step beyond would be to also adopt an “altar for all” policy stating that we are willing to host same-sex wedding ceremonies at the discretion of the pastor. Such a policy would finally remove the last asterisk from our vision, as we would no longer discriminate against LGBTQ people who want to pledge their faithful love before God and family.

Friends, there are 19 churches in the city of Onalaska alone. And out of all those churches, there are only two – *maybe*, because I am counting us – that welcome LGBTQ people. We all have friends or family members who are gay and lesbian, and many of these folks are or would like to be faithful Christians. They have gifts to offer the church. Wouldn't it be good if they could find a church home here?

Are we ready to take these steps and truly love all people unconditionally, even when we disagree with them? Are we ready to *do all the good we can*, and to welcome our LGBTQ friends who are also expressing their faith by bearing good fruit? I pray that we are. - Amen

i <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church>