

“Being Salt and Light”

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-16

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**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden
MUMC, Thomasville, NC**

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Being salt for the earth and light for the world, according to Matthew, was how Jesus thought of his followers. If we are to appreciate what Jesus was saying, we need to understand what that might have meant in Jesus’ day.

“You are salt for the earth,” Jesus said. What would the first disciples have thought of that? Salt purified, preserved, and gave taste to food, of course, but there is more. Salt was a rare and precious commodity in the ancient world, so valuable that it was sometimes used as currency. Comparing his disciples to salt, Jesus was saying that they were to purify, preserve and sanctify the earth.

That’s quite a tall order for ordinary people like you and me. Saltiness is something to be preserved and cherished, not something to be dissolved. The message here is not to dissolve ourselves into society in order to give it taste and flavor, but rather to retain our saltiness, for as Jesus says: “If salt loses its taste, what can make it salty again? It is good for nothing, and can only be thrown out to be trampled under people’s feet.”

Being salt for the earth means that this and every church needs to remain recognizable and visible. We at Memorial have embraced the nickname this community has given us, namely, “The Big Rock Church.” Among other things, it means that we are highly visible and recognizable here on Randolph Street in Thomasville. And that is not merely a reference to the building where salt for the earth is to be found, but to a community of Christ followers ...and that includes you and me. As salt we represent God to the world, and through our ministry and witness we try to we preserve, purify and sanctify the earth by allowing it to be what God created it to be.

Jesus also said: “You are light for the world.” Being light for the world is no easy option because on the whole the world prefers darkness to light. Yet despite that, we must continue to be the icon of the light of Christ, shining in people’s sight, so that, seeing our good works, they may offer praise to God. As Christ followers we are a threat to the forces of destruction, death and darkness, which tried once to extinguish the Light of the World, Jesus Christ.

Being salt and light ...this is what the Christian community is called to be: distinctive,

visible, sharing the world's predicament, yet pointing beyond it to God from whom all good things come, and to whom we all shall return. That is the vocation of the church – salt for the earth, light for the world, just as true now as it ever was.

As we think about what it means to be the church at this time and place, being salt and light is not optional. It would certainly be helpful if we had some guidelines that could make these words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount practical and easy to memorize ...like a 1-2-3 that we could refer to for guidance in every situation encountered in life. Well, it so happens that John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, apparently felt the same need. He took everything that Jesus taught us and summed it up in a work called *The General Rules* published in 1739.

A couple of years ago our bishop gave one of these little books written by Bishop Reuben Job to every pastor in our Conference. It is called *Three Simple Rules*. Bishop Job took the heart and soul of the longer version of Wesley's Rule and pressed it together into what he called a Wesleyan way of living forged by Father John in a time much like our own – a time of social upheaval and cultural change, a time of needed revival in the church, and a time of personal crisis and challenge in Wesley's own life as well.

So, this morning I am indebted to Bishop Job's contracted version of Wesley's Rules and will share his three simple and practical rules for being salt and light for the world. And, incidentally, Lynda Hepler at present is teaching the *Three Simple Rules* to the children here at Memorial.

Wesley's first Rule that can help us to be salt and light for the world is: “**Do no Harm.**” By doing no harm, Wesley meant “avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced.” At first, “Do no Harm” sounds passive, an admonition beginning in the negative. Do *no* harm. None of us means to do harm intentionally. We have all been in harm's way. We have all been hurt by words and deeds and have caused hurt just the same. We have been bruised and fractured and have caused bruising and brokenness whether we wanted to or not. We have experienced and caused injury “by what we have done and what we have left undone” as the words of a classic prayer of confession puts it.

Because Wesley, like us, knew both ends of harm's way, he raised Methodist consciousness about the harms done in society. Wesley was often heard saying that “there is no

holiness but social holiness.” He stood firmly against the ills and injustices of society in his day, for example, the exploitation of child labor and the practice of slavery. He directed all Methodists to commit to lives accountable to God and to one another – that they “Do no Harm” by their daily living nor cause injury to others, themselves or the world.

One way to do harm to others is with one of the smallest members of the human body, namely, the tongue. Our speech, whether taking God’s name in vain or someone else’s, the tone and the way we speak to one another, may shut down communication as much as opens it to understanding and common ground. Also, we enslave ourselves and others by holding prejudices and positions as possessions, keeping parts of life in impenetrable boxes, cut off from God’s barrier breaking spirit and life-changing, unlimited love of God that warmed John Wesley’s doubting heart.

Then there’s gossip. Some things never seem to change, do they? And gossiping is one of those things. We speak in ways that put others down, saying disparaging things to keep the upper hand. We diminish and condemn those with whom we disagree. It’s all about power and control, keeping people or consigning them to where we want them to be!

In “Do no Harm” law and grace collide. We have been harmed. We have done harm. We bear the scars. But we have the power to change. To “Do no Harm” means keeping on guard that all our actions and even our silence will not add injury to another of God’s children. As John Wesley and those early Methodists before us, let us determine everyday to invest our lives in bringing healing instead of hurt, wholeness instead of division, and harmony with the ways of Jesus rather than the ways of the world. When we live by “Do no Harm”, we begin to think, act and even look like Jesus. That’s what it means to be salt and light for the earth.

The second Rule is “**Do Good.**” Wesley declared that following Christ meant doing good at all times and to all people. I quote Wesley as he describes Methodists in his quaint old English style of writing: “By doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power, as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible to all...”

United Methodists have always been about doing good. We are proud to be known as a denomination of good deed doers with special offerings for many benevolences, Volunteers in Mission, Angel Food Ministry, and supporters of Project Divine Intervention and Meals of

Grace to shelter and feed the homeless. We get good grades for outreach, missions and generosity. Our historic tradition balances personal devotion and social holiness.

Being salt and light for the earth ...making a difference for good ...being a purifying and enlightening presence in society is what John Wesley meant by doing good, and may I add that is true also of Jesus who said: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” And Mr. Wesley adds: “Do good, as far as possible, *to all*.” So, good-deed-doing is not limited to those who are like us or who we like, or who like us. Doing good is to be indiscriminate. The common good, the good of the whole is the first thought, not what’s good for *me* ...not “I am the most important person in the world and if I don’t look out for *me* nobody will.”

Wesley in this “Do Good” rule, like Jesus in the gospels, challenges us to a bold, counter cultural way of life where a passion for mercy and justice, care for the earth, the blind seeing, the lame walking, the oppressed being set free will be as passionate a desire for God’s people as our desire for self fulfillment. Listen to these words of Jesus from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of some verses in Luke chapter 6: “Here’s a simple rule of thumb for your behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. If you only love the loveable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you deserve a medal? If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that’s charity...Live out a God-centered identity the way God lives towards us.” (Luke 6:27 ff.)

Being salt and light for the earth means that we’re way beyond doing good to feel good. Stirring up in us a “God-centered identity” and becoming a transformative presence in the world are what Jesus and John Wesley are after when they talk about “Doing Good.”

The third Rule is “**Stay in Love with God.**” Practicing “Do no Harm” and “Do Good” are of great importance, but without this third rule, the first two are impossible. And how is that accomplished?

“Stay in love with God” is Bishop’s Job’s translation of John Wesley’s “By attending to all the ordinances of God.” “Ordinance” may sound strange to our ears but to Wesley it described the disciplines that kept a person’s relationship with God vital and growing. Wesley names the public worship of God, the Lord’s Supper, private and family prayer, searching the

scriptures, fasting, and conferencing with fellow Christians as essentials. They boil down to things that make any relationship root and grow. Ask yourself: what are the critical elements for keeping a healthy relationship with a loved one? The same things: communication, finding time for talking and listening, trust-building, doing things together, being vulnerable to one another, respect, being friends. These same everyday things done in relationship with God make love grow the way love grows best: from inside out not outside in.

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* Tevya asks: “Do you love me?” His wife, Golda, replies: “Do I what?” “Do you *love* me,” Tevya persists. Golda answers: “For twenty five years I’ve washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned the house, given you children, milked the cow. After 25 years, why all the talk about love right now?” This repartee goes on and on, questions and answers, doubts and affirmations. In the end, remembering they love each other, they say “but even so, after 25 years it’s nice to know.”

Wesley never saw *Fiddler on the Roof* but knew about “staying in love with God.” Being a Methodist is all about getting to that place, puzzling through life, coming to know deep down that we are loved by God and we love God in return ...that we know God and are known by God.

What do you do to draw close to the love of God? Where are the places, the times you draw close to the love of God, or allow the love of God to draw close to you? The ways and means of doing so may be on John Wesley’s list, or Oprah or Dr. Phil’s maintaining-a-healthy-relationship list. Yet they are as different as our names and personalities. For some people intensive, personal or introspective prayer and study work best. For others more together-with-others, dialoging and actively doing service make the divine connection. For some, same day, same time, same ritual works. For others, it’s more spontaneous. The important thing is some relationship-building with God happening in our lives. One of the important reasons for our monthly Holy Communion in the Chapel and weekly Bible Study is they stir up in us the love of God.

Wesley says Methodists are people who need to find what works for them to stay in love with God. You could say the whole reason John Wesley and the early Methodists were a little overzealous with all their methods and disciplines was from knowing what it was like to have a loveless relationship with God. They wanted to feel the love of God.

Three Simple Rules: Do no Harm. Do Good. Stay in Love with God. I don't know about the "simple" part. We like to think in threes. We remember better in threes. It sounds simple but the life of "Do no Harm. Do Good. Stay in Love with God" is anything but simple. Sometimes when we're looking for the practical, we're really trying to make life easier than it really is. Wesley's *Three Simple Rules* aren't about ease as much as clarity and singleness of heart, mind and life in following Jesus. It's all about being salt and light for the world without shame or apology.

John Wesley believed the people called Methodists should be as difficult to hide as visitors to a foreign country. He believed that authentic Christianity carried some distinguishing marks. He believed that following Jesus should bear noticeable results, that we were and are to be molded by a different form than the world.

Thank God for the witness of our heritage. God help us with the *Three Simple Rules*:

Do no Harm.

Do Good.

Stay in Love with God ...as we become salt and light for the world and make a qualitative difference for Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.