

Sermon 2019.10.13

Do No Harm

(Mark 9:28-32; sermon 2 of 4 in Reconciling series “The Methodist Way”)

1. **Reconciling the Methodist way.** This month, we are exploring what it means to be Methodist, and how that helps us frame our journey to be a Reconciling church. Remember, last week we talked about Jesus’ commandment that, if we came to worship and remembered we had a beef with someone else at church, we should go and be reconciled – make peace with – our sister or brother before coming to the altar.



Big Tent



Three General Rules



Quadrilateral

1. Reconciling the Methodist way.

For too long, our varying attitudes about LGBTQ people have been the elephant in the room. Nobody wanted to talk about it, but we have not been at peace with each other. And sweeping our different attitudes under the rug, or keeping them in the closet, does no one any good. So we’re going to follow Jesus’ command and talk about it. Plus, a majority of you told us in our reconciling survey you wanted to hear me preach on it and you wanted to hear God Moments, real stories like Ruthie’s testimony.

So how does our Methodist heritage help us? We talked about three things:

- Our Methodist tradition as a big tent church where we don’t have to think alike in order to love alike.
- Our three general rules to (1) do no harm; (2) do all the good we can; and (3) stay in love with God.
- And the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as a tool for interpreting scripture and faith.

For the rest of this month, we’re using John Wesley’s three rules to help us guide our conversation. The first general rule for Methodists is: **Do no harm.** Today we are going to talk about three ways Christians do harm when it comes to LGBTQ people:

- Christians are doing harm to our witness and reputation.
- Christians are doing harm to ourselves.
- Christians are doing desperate harm to individuals, especially our youth.

1 DO NO HARM.

2 Do all the good you can.

3 Stay in love with God.

1. Reconciling the Methodist way.

Our scripture reading today is about the disciples doing some harm when they try to stop another Christian who is casting out demons in Jesus’ name, but isn’t one of Jesus’ chosen twelve. Honestly, I think the disciples are a bit jealous, because just a few verses earlier in

chapter 9 they had failed to cast out a demon (9:17-29). Jesus says to them, in essence... *Stop it!* ... “Whoever is not against us is for us” (9:40). Do no harm.

Let’s begin. But before we go to the next slide and talk about how Christians harm our witness with hatred, I need to warn you that the next slide is taken from a news article and contains some offensive language. Ready? Ok...

2. Harmful hatred. This image is of a protest by the Westboro Baptist Church. Over the past few decades they have gained notoriety by their loud and hateful pickets of military funerals and other public events all across the United States. Their big thing is gays. They hate gays in the military, and they hate gay marriage. They believe the Bible says homosexuality is a sin (we’ll get to that in a moment), and their message is that God hates gay people and that gay people are going to hell. And they shout this message of hate loudly outside of churches where people are grieving for their lost sons and daughters.



I told you it was an offensive picture.

The problem is that folks like Westboro Baptist get a lot of news coverage. For many Americans, *this* is the face of Christianity – a face of hateful anger. Instead of the love of Christ, these so-called Christians are sharing only bile and hatred. Instead of offering a cup of cool water to people in need (9:41), these so-called Christians are tossing acid in their faces.

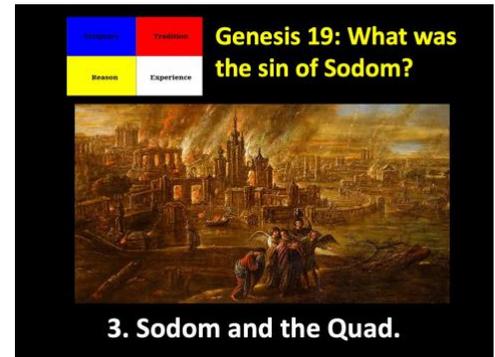
It doesn’t take a Christian to sense hypocrisy here. In fact, that is a major problem the unchurched have with Christians: – that we claim to believe one thing (love God and love your neighbor) but instead express another thing (God hates you and you’re going to hell). Friends, this hatred harms the church, and it harms those who need a relationship with God through the church.

Now, you might be thinking, “I’m not out there shouting hateful slogans. I think homosexuality is a sin, but I keep it to myself. My buddies and I tell a few jokes in private. But I have gay friends, and I like them. Hate the sin, love the sinner.”

In principle, it’s okay to hate the sin and love the sinner. We don’t like sin, but we’re supposed to love all people. And we’re all sinners, right? But in practice, we often fail to be truly loving. We treat some supposed sins differently than others. We tell little jokes. We edge away from people who are different.

Friends, people can sniff out our hypocrisy. Instead of hating the sin and loving the sinner, we need to turn it around and put an emphasis on *loving* the sinner before we make excuses for *hating* the sin.

3. Sodom and the Quad. So why do some Christians like Westboro Baptist think it is okay to be so hateful toward homosexuals? Well, they base their hate on six bible verses. Out of 31,102 verses in the Bible, they base their hatred on the six so-called clobber verses that appear to condemn homosexuality. These are listed in the “What Does the Bible Say about LGBTQ People?” pamphlet on the reconciling table in the lobby.



Let’s digress for a moment and apply the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to think about one of these passages. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is infamous. Some angelic visitors come to stay with Abraham’s cousin Lot in the city of Sodom. The men of the town form a mob and demand that Lot send out his guests so the men can rape them. In the end, Lot and his family flee the city and God rains down fire and brimstone, destroying Sodom. This is such a famous story that “sodomy” has become a term for homosexual intercourse.

So how do we read this from a Reconciling United Methodist point of view, instead of a Westboro Baptist view? We apply the four tools of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.

Scripture is our main tool. Is the sin of the men of Sodom homosexuality in general, or is it a failure to show hospitality to strangers and a desire to conduct violent gang rape of guests? Other scripture helps us interpret this. Ezekiel 16:49 says, “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” They failed to show proper hospitality. In the New Testament, Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Second, what does the tradition of the church say? Well, the tradition of the church says that sex is a good gift from God in the context of a loving, committed, monogamous, married relationship. Clearly, what the men of Sodom proposed was not sex in context of marriage, but sex as a form of abuse.

What about reason? Here, we struggle with language and culture. You know how we have one word for snow, but the Eskimos have a hundred to describe different kinds of snow? We just have one English word – homosexual – and it doesn’t cover the many nuances here. The original Hebrew and Greek of the bible need to be read in context. We all agree that pederasty, rape, promiscuity, and prostitution are bad, whether homosexual or heterosexual. That’s pretty much what the bible is talking about. Yet we lump it all under the term

“homosexual,” along with gay marriage. One of these things is not like the others... again, the men of Sodom weren't interested in marriage, but in gang rape.

Finally, experience. Do we know gay Christians who are faithful to their partners? Do we know gay Christians who are effective disciples, who love God, and study scripture, and grow deeper in faith, and serve the church, and engage in mission? Most homosexuals want the same things that heterosexuals want – a loving relationship with a lifetime partner. Once again, that is not what Genesis 19 describes.

Scripture, tradition, reason, experience: using the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, I think we can dispose of the Westboro Baptist interpretation that all homosexuality is evil and thus it is okay to hate people. Indeed, going back to scripture as our primary tool, Jesus says, “This is how people will know you are my followers: if you love one another” (John 13:35).

4. Harmful obsessions. Now that we've considered scripture, let's talk about another way we are doing harm. Christians are harming ourselves with our obsession over this subject. To put it bluntly, we have an unhealthy obsession with sex.



4. Harmful obsession.

Every Tuesday I get together with a group of men down at Marge's on Rose for breakfast and a bible study. The men come from several churches, and a few are unchurched. The subject of LGBTQ Christians and how we include them comes up from time to time as we read the bible.

One man, not from our church, is generally supportive of including LGBTQ people in church. But he also likes to dance around just what homosexuals do in their bedrooms.

I finally had to say, “We need to stop thinking about the junk in the trunk. It isn't appropriate to think about what other people do with their junk. I certainly don't look at you and think about what you and your wife do with your junk. I hope that when you look at your pastor on Sunday morning, or you look at the people sitting around you in the pews, that you aren't thinking about what they and their partners do with their junk. It isn't about the junk!”

Seriously friends, stop thinking about the junk – about people's different parts and what they do with them in the privacy of their own bedrooms. You are just harming yourselves with this obsession. Remember, in the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:28, Jesus says that if you look at someone else lustfully you are committing sin in your heart.

The conversation about gay marriage is about loving lifetime partnerships, and whether God can bless them. It isn't about the junk in the trunk. So stop obsessing over it!

5. Harming the little ones. My final point today is about how we are doing harm to others, especially the little ones, with our attitudes about LGBTQ people.



5. Harming the little ones.

Earlier this year, I got an unexpected text message from a woman at a previous church I served. She was worried about her daughter, who I remembered as a cheerful, chubby-cheeked little angel in the Christmas pageants. Now a teenager, her daughter was struggling. When her mom asked if she would talk to a pastor, the daughter said “Could I text Pastor Park?” Somehow, we had a connection and she trusted me, even though we haven’t seen each other for years and now live many miles apart.

I texted this young person and told her she could send me questions. Let me read some of our conversation:

O: Hello Pastor Park! I have a question that has been bugging me lately. If God loves all his children, why do people say it’s wrong to be gay, or transgender, or LGBTQ+?

Me: Only some people say that, and not me.

O: What do you mean?

Me: There are very few verses in the Bible which condemn homosexuality, and many people (including me) think they are condemning rape, sex with children, and similar things that we all agree are bad whether straight or homosexual... Regardless, the Bible is absolutely clear that all people are made in God’s image & God loves every one of us.

O: So what I am getting is this: the bible doesn’t say homosexuality is bad, but rape is bad? Cuz rape is down right terrible so if that is was you are saying I agree with that. I just have a hard time because I am LGBTQ+ and have many gay, bi, trans, etc. friends, and we are told we are going to hell cuz we are the way we are.

Me: Yes, rape is bad. But I don’t think being LGBTQ is bad. There are some Christians who think this, but I would suggest you ignore them.

O: My father is one of that. Surprisingly my family is very accepting for my sexuality part. I am struggling with my gender cuz most days I feel like I have no gender. And I go by Ollie from my friends. And my family does not like the idea of me identifying differently.

Me: (I told her I know many good Christians who are LGBTQ, and added...) Nope – I’m quite sure God loves you. If you prefer me to call you Ollie, I will. Give your family time to come around. They love you, but this takes getting used to.

O: I am literally in tears of happiness. Yes, I understand...

Ollie and I have stayed in touch; they gave me permission to share this story. Ollie struggles with self-harm and thoughts of suicide, and they have a hard time in school because some of the students bully them. They have their ups and downs, but I continue to pray for them. And

I grieve that they have heard the message from other Christians that God hates them... this beautiful child of God.

I think Jesus grieves too. Remember our scripture reading: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

According to a study published this year in the Journal of Adolescent Health, one in four teen suicide deaths is among LGBTQ youth. John Ayers, a researcher at the University of California, commented on the study, “Suicide is not caused because of their LGBT identify, but rather by how the world reacts to their identity.”ⁱⁱ

In the La Crosse/Onalaska/Holmen region, over 200 youth are homeless.ⁱⁱⁱ We don’t tend to see them on the streets because they are couch-surfing, staying with other friends or family members. One reason some of these students are homeless is that they have come out, and their families have thrown them out.

Friends, we are doing harm when we do not love our youth and young adults, regardless of their sexuality or identity.

We are doing harm when gifted and called clergy like the ones represented by these stoles are rejected by the church, and we lose their ministry and outreach to the lost.

We are doing harm when young adults like Ruth aren’t sure they have a home in the church.

6. We need to do better. We need to do better. As Methodists, our first general rule from John Wesley is to “Do no harm.” This is firmly rooted in Jesus’ command to “Love God with everything we’ve got, and love our neighbors as ourselves” (Mark 12:30-31), and his rule that we “do to others what we would have them do to us” (Matthew 7:12).

- 1 Do no harm.**
- 2 Do all the good you can.**
- 3 Stay in love with God.**

6. We need to do better.

We must do no harm. But we need to do better than just doing no harm. We need to love our neighbors, our brothers and sisters, our sons and daughters and others, no matter what. We need to do all the good we can... and that’s what we’ll talk about next week.

- Amen.

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Christianity#Hypocrisy – and –

<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/what-about-hypocrites-in-the-church/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/one-four-pre-teen-suicides-may-be-lgbtq-youth-n974481>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://lacrossetribune.com/news/local/in-la-crosse-s-battle-against-student-homelessness-it-takes/article_2d23a751-ab5b-5e10-879b-cc82608d7b34.html