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Sermon of January 11, 2009 Dr. Jim Standiford

Three Simple Rules: “Stay in Love with God”

Colossians 2:6-10, 12

Lord Jesus Christ, shine the light of your love into our hearts so that we might live by that light all of our days. Amen.

If we care about someone, whether that person is a good friend, neighbor, co-worker, or loved one, we communicate with them. The way to keep a relationship alive is through some form of contact. Relationships are important to us. They are a part of our DNA, of our basic make-up. We come by our desire for relationships naturally. There is a creation and there are creatures because God wants to be in relationship. Theologically we understand the first relational community was in the Godhead, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Scripture tells us God creates the first human and almost immediately observes it is not good for man to be alone. So the human community is developed. We have a deep feeling of need to be in relationship with each other.

Consider all the forms of communication that are so widely used these days: cell phones, texting, email, facebook, myspace, and ning for staying in touch with lots of friends, LinkedIn for building business contacts, Skype for online video-chatting, and hanging out at Starbuck's, or better yet the Cove Coffeehouse. In the days of early American Methodism, camp meetings were extremely popular, especially among rural populations, as people traveled to be together for a week of socializing and worshipping. Families frequently gather for holiday celebrations. I know of a neighborhood where the families drive several hours to a beach campsite for a weekend together each summer even though they all live next door to each other in their home community. Relationships are important to us and we nurture them with frequent contact.

We also know we need a relationship with God. St. Augustine said it so

beautifully, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” If we love God we will seek ways to keep our relationship with God open and strong. We will be in frequent contact with God, using a variety of ways to interact with God.

John Wesley developed what he called “General Rules” to help the early Methodists to live their Christian faith after their conversion. We are calling these the “Three Simple Rules.” The first is “Do No Harm.” The second is “Do Good.” The third, which we are considering today, is “Stay In Love With God.” John Wesley believed the acts he called “the ordinances of the church,” or sometimes “the means of grace,” kept the relationship between God and humans vital, alive, and growing. These ordinances are: worship, the Lord’s Supper, private and family prayer, searching the scripture, and fasting. A means of grace for us today as we remember the baptism of Jesus is to celebrate the baptism of children and at the end of the service renew our own baptismal vows. It has been said that the mark of a Methodist is a way of life, not just a set of beliefs. The way we live that way of life is to stay in love with God.

Today we call these kinds of practices spiritual disciplines, acts that open us to God’s Spirit coming to us in new ways. I am confident Mr. Wesley would encourage an open and flexible understanding of what constitutes “means of grace” in our lives. Some people I know consider singing a spiritual discipline. My singing demonstrates no discipline, but music does a lot for my spirit. I deeply appreciate the choir, for their singing regularly opens me to God. Journaling, walking a labyrinth, and meditation are among some popular disciplines today. Whatever speaks to your spirit and opens you to God’s presence should be employed on a regular basis to keep your relationship with God alive and in love with God. Wesley’s list is varied. To me that is very important. Due to a number of factors in life the same act does not always speak to us in the same way. Sometimes it doesn’t work at all. A varied pattern gives us the best chance to keep the relationship alive.

The writer of Colossians senses that one image or method doesn’t always speak to all of us. He encourages us, “Continue to live your lives in Christ, rooted and built up in him, abounding in thanksgiving.” “Rooted” is an agricultural image. “Built up” is a construction image. He is advocating staying in love with Jesus, but uses two different images to communicate his message. My folks set me to doing yard work at a very early age. I now prefer the more refined term “gardening,” but working outdoors with soil and plants is still for me a very spiritual time. It is a healthy time of listening on my part. It is a time in which I become more deeply rooted in my relationship with God. In contrast, Mary Lou can tell you of a couple of horror stories of my early attempts at building furniture. Things I have built-up just seem to fall down far too easily. In contrast God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, builds us up all the time.

Richard Farley was a rough and tumble construction worker in our congregation in Phoenix. He was a man of simple but deep faith. He loved to work at our United Methodist Camp Mingus up in the pine forests of northern Arizona. One day he and I were re-roofing one of the cabins there. It was a very steep roof. We just couldn’t keep from sliding off. Richard was a lot stouter than I so his solution was I would get on the roof with a rope tied around my waist the end of which would be thrown over the crown of the roof. Richard would stand on the ground on the opposite side and hold me in place. It was a great theory. However, Richard was a big teaser who

periodically would loosen the tension on the rope and I would feel myself beginning to slip off. I would whoop and he would re-tension the rope. We got yelling back and forth about trust and finally he said to me, "Do you trust Jesus, preacher?" I assured him I did. "Well, then you have to trust me as much as you trust Jesus." Richard built up my faith in God and in humanity.

Bishop Rueben Job in his book, *Three Simple Rules*, states we stay in love with God by practicing spiritual disciplines, but also by doing acts of goodness or mercy, by loving our neighbor. We could say that staying in love with God can also be strengthened as we stay in love with the world. This is very consistent with Jesus' great commandment of loving God and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Former President Bill Clinton watched TV the day Nelson Mandela was released from prison and noticed the anger and hatred on Mandela's face as he walked from his cell block to the front of the prison. Years later when each was the president of his respective country Clinton asked Mandela about his expression. Mandela replied, "I'm surprised you saw that, and I regret that the camera caught my anger. Yes, you are right...that day when I stepped out of prison and looked at the people observing, a flash of anger hit me with the thought that they had robbed me of twenty-seven years. Then the Spirit of Jesus said to me, "Nelson, while you were in prison you were free, now that you are free don't become a prisoner." Nelson Mandela's emotions naturally gravitated toward anger and resentment until he recognized what was happening. Then he made a different choice.

There are particular disciplines and specific people who will help you stay in love with God. Practice those disciplines, converse often with those people. Stay in love with God, you will want to hear when God speaks.*

* Note: The Nelson Mandela story is from Tony Campolo's book, *Let Me Tell You A Story*.

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