

Shiloh United Methodist Church

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

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Three Simple Rules: Do Good

“Many of us have stories about old couches — particularly ones we had in college, or shortly after. But not many stories are like the one three roommates in New Paltz, N.Y., can now tell.

After the trio realized their beat-up couch was stuffed with more than \$40,000, they decided to return the money to its rightful owner.

It all started when roommates Reese Werkhoven, Cally Guasti and Lara Russo realized that the lumps in their couch's pillows were actually envelopes stuffed with money. Just two months earlier, they'd bought the couch for \$20 at a Salvation Army store.

"It had these bubble wrap envelopes, just like two or three of them," Werkhoven tells [CBS New York](#). "We ripped them out and [I] was just like freaking out, like an inch and a half of \$100 bills."

Or, as he told SUNY, New Paltz student-run blog [The Little Rebellion](#), "I almost peed."

They kept finding more envelopes in the couch, pulling money out of it like an upholstered ATM.

Werkhoven added, "The most money I'd ever found in a couch was like 50 cents. Honestly, I'd be ecstatic to find just \$5 in a couch."

The discovery was like a dream for the three friends, all of whom are either in college or recent graduates.

As they counted the money, they talked about what they might do with it; Werkhoven says he wanted to buy his mom a new car. But then they spotted a name among the

envelopes, and realized they were faced with an ethical puzzle.

"We had a lot of moral discussions about the money," Russo tells Little Rebellion. "We all agreed that we had to bring the money back to whoever it belonged to ... it's their money — we didn't earn it. However, there were a lot of gray areas we had to consider."

They asked their parents for advice; don't spend the money, they were told. A phone number led them to the family that had donated the couch — and to answers about why it was full of money.

The roommates drove to the woman's house in what The Little Rebellion calls "a rustic home in a rough neighborhood."

"I think the part of this whole experience that cleared away my prior thoughts and worries was when I saw the woman's daughter and granddaughter greet us at the door," Werkhoven tells the blog. "I could just tell right away that these were nice people."

It turned out that the money was socked away out of the woman's late husband's concerns that he wouldn't always be there for his wife (she has chosen to remain anonymous). It represented decades of savings, including wages from the woman's job as a florist.

For years, she also slept on the couch. But recent back problems led her daughter and son-in-law to replace it with a bed, meaning that the couch had to go.

"This was her life savings and she actually said something really beautiful, like 'This is my husband looking down on me and this was supposed to happen,' " Guasti tells CBS NY.

After they returned the money to the woman, Guasti, Russo and Werkhoven received \$1,000 as a reward.”¹

Today we are continuing our sermon discussion of the three simple rules of John Wesley for Methodists, with “Do Good.”

Our scripture today from the letter of 2nd Corinthians is inviting the Corinthian people to take the step in faith that happens after you come to know the love of God. John Wesley the founder of the Methodist practice of faith called this going on to perfection. Wesley believed you could be made perfect through Grace in this life.

Perfection is a loaded term in our current world. We equate perfection with near to godliness, something that is without flaw, and often for us in a culture based on production of goods and services we equate this with doing the perfect job each day, with no mistakes.

Interestingly, this is not an entirely Christian notion. It actually can trace its roots to Plato, and his conversation about the perfect form. See for Plato there were perfect objects, a perfect chair existed somewhere that gave the idea for the chairs that are made, but none are as perfect as the ideal object. There is somewhere the perfect form of a cat, and the cats we see in the everyday world are based on the

¹ https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/05/16/313118337/thrift-store-couch-yields-40-000-roommates-return-money?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=20140516

perfect cat somewhere. Similarly, there is a perfect human somewhere and in this idea we are all striving to be that perfect human.

This Greek notion drifted easily into the teachings of Paul, because he was surrounded by Greek schools of thought alongside his Jewish upbringing. The challenge of these notions of perfection is one thing, no one, but God, would ever know what the perfect forms are.

This is where grace and Jesus as the Word come in. In the gospel of John, Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. This means perfection and sense of perfection by God's power has been shared with us. We are capable of grasping the things of God's perfection through the love of God found in Jesus Christ.

I want to remind all of this, this is not the world's perfection. The world's perfection in modern America would make all of us hyper intelligent, super athletes, who can multitask and do anything. Perfection in God's eyes is what we strive for, and this mystery seemingly involves the weak becoming powerful, and the lowly being lifted up.

John Wesley would go on because of this understanding to name a second rule he hoped the Methodists would follow as they sought God, Do Good. First they were to "Do No Harm," second, and our rule for today, Methodists were called to "Do Good."

When John Wesley shared this idea of doing good, he was hoping to encourage the people under his pastoral support to grow closer to God in the deeds and actions of this life. Paul also was clearly calling for this in his writing to the Corinthians.

One of my favorite authors, Bishop John Shelby Spong, writes this about the book to the Corinthians.

When we turn to the content of these two Corinthian epistles, we find Paul dealing with human beings who are acting very much like human beings. Paul knows what every pastor knows— namely, that congregations are not made up of angels. At the same time congregations learn very quickly that ordination does not bestow perfection on their ordained leader. Pastoral care is the sensitive attempt to bring wholeness out of an exchange between human passion and human insecurity. It is a delicately nuanced balancing act, the purpose of which is to enhance the humanity of all who are involved. If we need a text to describe what I believe is the goal of all pastoral activity, it would be the Fourth Gospel's definition of Jesus' purpose: "I have come," John has Jesus say, "that they might have life and have it abundantly" (10: 10). That is finally both the mission of the Christian church and the hoped-for outcome in every pastoral relationship. Abundant life, please note, does not always mean happiness or even the easing of pain. Many people seek wholeness in quite destructive ways, with addiction to drugs, alcohol, sex and even success being just a few of them. Sometimes abundant life becomes possible only in confrontation and brokenness. Real pastoral care is not about helping another to feel good; it is about helping wholeness to be created. Paul understood that and every pastor must learn it sooner or later. Wholeness is seen in the freedom to be and in the ability to escape the survival mentality that inevitably locks us into self-centeredness. Wholeness is found in the maturity of being able to live for another by giving our love away.²

² Spong, John Shelby. *Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World* (pp. 248-249). Harper Collins, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

That last line is what Wesley was trying to help Methodists understand about their faith in the rule Do Good. Wholeness in this practice of faith is found in the ability to “live for another by giving our love away.” This is not always about joy and heroes, it also comes from deep sacrifice, and living through pain.

Before I go further I want to highlight something that Reuben Job highlights in his book called, *Three Simple Rules*, which highlights these rules of John Wesley we are studying. Reuben Job points out that this practice of doing good is not done by burning oneself out, or by overextending oneself. He says this, because many helping professions have lived out this call of doing good, by ignoring the care of their own self to remain healthy. We see this in clergy, doctors, public servants, and more. In truth this rule of doing good is lived out by grounding oneself in deep practices of care lived each day, practices that admit our humanity and frailty, and also our connection to God to overcome great challenges by faith.

For example, Sara Miles is part of the Episcopal Church, she speaks of a friend who is a chaplain in a hospital. On Ash Wednesday each year, the doctor’s receive ashes. Sara’s friend says, “When they receive ashes, even they feel some relief in recognizing they are human, mortal. That even they cannot fix everything.” Doing good comes from a place of admitting our human reality and letting us live by God’s grace and love, by being messy humans who by following the ways of Jesus to abundant life, move closer to God.

Doing good sounds too simple for most of though, like we can check this off our list each day for simply picking up a piece of trash and saying, “I did my good for today.”

First, I want to say, don't underestimate God's ability to work through the simple. Second, don't think God has a checklist, because those of us who have practiced faith for a while know that once you start down this path of doing good, God does not stop with what you consider your checklist. In fact, our heavenly parent doesn't really even like checklists based on what Jesus shared with us about God's love. God will call us to do good, in whatever ways God wants.

Take for example my friend Frank's friend Stephanie, from a story he tells this way:

When Frank was in High School, his church youth group embarked on a mission trip to Mexico. For seven sun scorching, days they renovated a parsonage, installed a septic system, and volunteered at a Vacation Bible School. Stephanie was a high school senior in the group and had no desire to be there.

Stephanie came from the wealthier side of the tracks, more wealthy than most of the working class families who had sent kids on this trip. She wore the right clothes, had a great hair style, and drove a bright yellow mustang convertible her parents bought her for her sixteenth birthday. She was used to Mexico, as in the resorts where you can sunbath. So she showed up at the church to go on the trip with her Armani luggage bulging with makeup, beach novels, and boarded a school bus for the barrios of Cancun.

We soon discovered that Cancun is a two-tiered city. On the sea side, it was posh hotels and 5 star restaurants. On the other, just a short throw away is tin shacks, cardboard out houses, and fly infested dumping grounds where children fight for scraps. Panhandling is discouraged, to keep tourism

up. And due to this force to keep the poor away from the tourists, well to do packs of teens patrol the streets to keep the poor in the correct part of the city.

Throughout the week of service Stephanie kept somewhat to herself. She painted the plywood, cut out biblical characters, and, but once off duty would steal away to read in the shade or stroll the beach.

One day she was walking back and a young boy clad in nothing, but cutoffs darted from behind a shack and across a dirt road in front of her as fast as rabbit being hunted. Pursuing him was pack of boys, like frenzied dogs, all bearing social badges of shoes and button shirts. They chased the young boy to an empty field, and pounced on him to beat the small boy senseless.

Something in Stephanie broke. Without realizing her actions she flung herself into the field, screaming, "Enough! Enough!" Stephanie slid on her knees threaded the way through the kicking boys, and put her body around the young boys. Once her body was in the way, the other boys backed off in shock and scampered back to the sky scrapers. Leaving Stephanie hugging the whimpering little boy.

The night they were set to leave Cancun, Stephanie stood in front of the school bus arguing with her youth pastor, "Can't we just stay a few more days, there is so much pain here."

Today Stephanie is a immigration rights attorney, working just south of San Diego. She tracks her current service to that night in Cancun, and how her heart was opened. ³

Friends, when we are called to do good. It is a call to step into the story of God, and let God's love open us to our role. May we find ways to Do No Harm and to be called to Do Good.

As you go into the world this week, in prayer, and in action may we find ways to do the good that God calls us to, so that we can live abundantly, return people their life savings, and be changed by the pain we see in the world.

Shalom and Amen

³ Rogers, F. (2011). *Finding God in the graffiti: Empowering teenagers through stories*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.