Every year at Annual Conference individuals who have felt the call of God to ordained ministry whether that call is to be a deacon or an elder in the United Methodist Church and wishes to be in full membership in the Annual Conference stands up before the Executive Session of the Annual Conference, all the ordained clergy, and has these questions asked of him or her by the Bishop!

1. Have you faith in Christ?
2. Are you going on to perfection?
3. Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?
4. Are you earnestly striving after it?
5. Are you resolved to devote yourself wholly to God and his work?
6. Do you know the General Rules of our Church?
7. Will you keep them?
8. Have you studied the doctrines of the United Methodist Church?
9. After full examination, do you believe that our doctrines are in harmony with the Holy Scriptures?
10. Will you preach and maintain them?
11. Have you studied our form of Church discipline and polity?
12. Do you approve our Church government and polity?
13. Will you support and maintain them?
14. Will you diligently instruct the children in every place?
15. Will you visit from house to house?
16. Will you recommend fasting or abstinence, both by precept and example?
17. Are you determined to employ all your time in the work of God?
18. Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work?
19. Will you observe the following directions:
   a. Be diligent. Never be unemployed. Never be triflingly employed. Never trifle away time; neither spend any more time at any one place than is strictly necessary.
   b. Be punctual. Do everything exactly at the time. And do not mend our rules, but keep them; not for wrath, but for conscience’ sake.

We could spend some time on each of these historic questions pinned by John Wesley, but I would have us look this morning only at one and its sequel. Do you know the General Rules of our church and will you keep them?

You are United Methodists! You come to church here at First United Methodist Church. Do you know the General Rules of our church? Can anyone here tell them to me?

They are: Do No Harm, Do All the Good you can, and stay in love with God. Those will be our themes for the next few weeks.

“These are the General Rules of our Societies; all of which are taught of God to observe, even in his written Word, which is the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice.
And all of these we know his Spirit writes on our truly awakened hearts,” so says our book of 2012 Discipline, ¶104, page 78.

Just three simple rules. It’s Wesley’s way of expressing the first and second commandment. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all our soul, with all your might, and your neighbor as yourself. Everything else is contained in these two.

John Wesley was pretty disciplined about his Methodist societies and people following these rules as well. Let me continue to quote John Wesley from the book of discipline.  “If there be any among us who observe them not, who habitually break any of them, let it be known unto them who watch over that soul as they who must give an account.  We will admonish him of the error of his ways.  We will bear with him for a season.  But then, if he repent not, he hath no more place among us.  We have delivered our own souls.”

Rueben Job in his book, “Three Simple Rules” says that these rules have the power to change the world.

“Do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God” are ancient simple words seldom put to the test, but words when lived out in this life, could transform the whole earth.

We really do live in a world of divisiveness that separates, disparages, disrespects, diminishes, and leaves us wounded and incomplete. Everyone knows that the path we are own as a world is neither healthy or morally right and cannot lead to a positive ending.

I don’t want to say that the salvation of the earth is up solely to us United Methodists, but can you imagine the outcomes of our communities if every United Methodist world wide would live into these 3 simple rules. If young and old, rich and poor, powerful and weak and those of every theological persuasion in the church would live out these worlds, we would have a transformed culture, we would together, change the world.

Wesley believed this in his day so much that he took this as the blueprint of his societies, fleshed it out, taught it, and expected every Methodist to practice it.

I’ve been told that it was the Methodism influence of living out these simple rules that kept England from breaking out in civil war against each other in those turbulent times of the industrial revolution.

I never imagined that we would be living in such a divided and angry world today. I thought that the world learned it’s lessons during the first and second world wars, that the leaders of the world would never again be willing to be involved in another World War, and be drawn together in harmony, peace, and plenty, but as I see the spread of terrorism and hatred, I think we may have forgotten our lessons learned in those days.

Yes alas, a world of peace and plenty for all has not happened in my life as I thought it would. Nations seem to be growing more hostile toward each other; communities are divided around issues of education, development, of who equal rights apply to and who they don’t. Religions are divided with each claiming the “real truth”, and the other being apostate. Denominations and congregations are separated over doctrine and what constitutes faithful discipleship and whose in and whose out, and no one is truly winning in these wars against each other, and no one is innocent in the deception. Even our witness to the redeeming love of God in Christ Jesus loses its authenticity and its power in the wake of so much division and segregation and hatred.

Those who follow Jesus must be asking and are asking, “is there not a better way to live with each other?” “Is there not a better way to practice our faith?” a way so simple that none are turned away because of its complexity, and all are able to practice it because of its simplicity. Is there some core orthodoxy, as “Steve Copley” would say among the central faiths of the world?

At our best, we Christians do believe in the possibility that such a way of living together exists and is open to all.

The apostle Paul had his own version of these simple rules when he wrote to the Colossians saying: As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility,
meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you. And above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Colossians 3:12-14.

And again, when he wrote to those in Galatia, “by contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”.

They, like we, began their journey with Christ, determined to follow Jesus without straying to the left or right or faltering from their commitment to following him. Their world, like ours, was not on a path toward God and just and righteous living. Paul knew and those that wrote in his name knew that only a determined and radical change of heart would keep us on this path of discipleship.

I think most of us yearn to live just and good lives, lives of discipleship and faithfulness to Jesus in all we think, say, and do, but it isn’t easy. I think we all want to be faithful to the highest we know, and that we want to practice our faith in ways that lead to healing and wholeness, ways that are life giving and not destructive and life-denying, ways that foster dignity and respect. Disagreement, dialogue, debate, and honest conversation, patience, compromise, and collaboration are expected in forging our way forward together, for we all need help in finding ways to live a holy and good life in a world like ours.

Wesley’s particulars may sound antiquated and out of date for our modern culture, but the ideology behind them is contemporary - do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.

These words are particularly suited to our time and our culture for the transformation of our world.

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

Sung Response: Do no harm by any word or deed; do good wherever there is need. Remain attentive to God’s word. Stay in love with God. Stay in love with God.