



Prudential Means of Grace
A Lenten message from
Reverend Randy Cross
Prairie Hills
District Superintendent

Hello – I’m Randy Cross, superintendent of the Prairie Hills District for the Dakotas, which I am convinced God created because there needed to be a little heaven on Earth. Even better than West Virginia.

Anyway, we have spent the last few weeks of Lent reviewing what are known as “works of piety,” or internal, personal spiritual disciplines. Things like prayer, or fasting or Bible study. They were known in John Wesley’s time as “instituted means of grace.” Today, however, we take a leap in our conversation about spiritual disciplines, as we move to “prudential means of grace.” “Prudential” from the word “prudence,” means involving and showing care and forethought in our management of our lives and resources. What that means, is that we are going to spend some time talking about what it means to live with “outward holiness,” and living out “works of mercy,” instead of works of piety.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was convinced that these two pieces of our life of discipline were to be woven into each other. Almost like inhaling and exhaling – we need to make sure we do an equal amount of both, or we’re in trouble! The author, Steve Harper, quotes Walter Trobisch on the dangers of Christians becoming “spiritually bloated” – only taking in the internal grace of Christ, and never letting the love and grace flow out through their lives into the world. So – we pray, we fast, we read the Bible, we worship, we are strengthened and filled by devotions and discipline that are brought into our lives and hearts – and THEN, we continue the work of Discipline by outwardly living what it means to be the hands and voice of Christ in our world. Breathe in, breathe out – there is wholeness to that way of living.

Bishop Rueben Job, from the Dakotas, and perhaps the godfather of United Methodist spiritual life, framed these “prudential” means of grace so well in his book “Three Simple Rules.” They are simple, but a wonderful guide for us as we “breathe out.”

The first rule is “Do No Harm.” Seems like something pretty easy for a Christian, don’t you think? It is however a bit deeper than having your dad say, “Behave yourself!” What is meant is really more like, “Learn how to stop harming.” Grow new habits of refraining from evil and sinning against others, and God. More than a matter of the will, “do no harm” is a decisive matter of the heart. We are in the season of Lent, and just prior to this time, many of us experienced Fat Tuesday, or Shrove Tuesday, or Mardi Gras, which is actually French for “Fat Tuesday.” It was historically the day before Lent when you would go throughout the entire house and get rid of all meat, and especially all fats in anticipation of a season of fasting. “Shrove” means “to shed.” When Moses stood before the burning bush, the command was to “shed” his shoes. Don’t pick them up again – they are of no further use to you, because you are standing on holy ground. In the context of our discussion here, we are invited, urged, called, to shed/shrive every and any habit that harms another, or ourselves. We draw a line in the sand, as it were, over which we will not cross ever again. Instead of merely avoiding doing bad things, we create in this discipline a new boundary for our lives. We live with restraint and discipline, so that even when it is the most delicious and almost most sensible thing to do – we will NOT do harm. It is no longer part of our lives. Now, you could go on and on making a list of the things you won’t do – I think that’s a bit too external, however. “Do no harm” requires a sensitivity of our hearts, having grown in spiritual strength and depth, we now face the world as new creations, in which we would not even consider the possibility of harming anyone by our words, our actions, or our intent.

The second rule that grabs our attention as we work to live in an outward holiness is “Do Good.” Again, like the first rule, this is more than a list to be checked off in a day. We “do good” as we intend good as our hearts and minds work together to see clearly where “good” may be needed, or absent in our world, or waiting for us to bring that gift. It is a social spirituality, which I live out my love for Jesus Christ through the work I do in this world. And the first component is indeed learning

how to do good physically – how do we care for the needs of our brothers and sisters in this world? What is needed, that I might bring? The Wesleys were convinced that this was a critical part of living true faith, that they pledged themselves and the societies to caring for the poor, hungry, sick, imprisoned. Today, in many United Methodist churches, it is a common sight to see food pantries, and clothing stores, and a thousand different ways to express our missional outreach both locally and around the world. That’s who we are, because our parents in the faith recognized the spiritual gift of being able to love by caring for others.

The second component is as important, but perhaps more risky: . I’m talking about evangelism, and disciple making – our holy discipline is to actually turn the face of this world toward the face of God. It is for us to introduce a hurting world to the healing power and love of Christ. Let me say that each of us has not only the ability, but also the call placed on our lives to love the souls of others, and to shepherd them into a caring relationship with Jesus. How can we not do that “good?” Who do you know today who needs to know what you know of the love of Jesus Christ? What is stopping you from sharing that outward holiness with them?

Thirdly, we are called to care for the family of God itself – to live as the beloved community with one another. Again, our first response to this may be “Well, of course – everyone loves each other in church!” But you and I both know that there occasions, and even seasons in local churches where some plain mean things occur. Ugly words are spoken, hearts are broken, relationships cut, and the Body of Christ almost appears to be diseased. But this is where we learn to love. In church is where we grow those habits of forgiveness and creative conversations, and dreaming together, and making room for another’s life and faith, even if it is not what we would prefer. If we can’t learn to love around the table set by Jesus, at which we are all honored guests, how could we dare think we would be capable of loving the world, and doing the good required of us. Let’s heal our churches – beginning today. The third rule, as Bishop Job states it, is “stay connected with God.” Otherwise, it’s stated, “attend to the ordinances of God.” It’s here that all we have been talking about these past weeks comes full circle! You see, all that you have learned to do privately – all of those personal,

inner acts of devotion – we now begin to learn how to express publicly. It is the community of faith – with me, being bound to my brothers and sisters with ties that blessed! It is no longer “I pray,” but whenever I do, whether by myself, or with others, it is “we pray!” In my heart, I am surrounded by the family of God, and the cloud of witnesses of those who have lived and died before me in the faith. No longer, “I worship,” but always “we worship.” We become the Body of Christ, and not simply body parts doing our own thing. We are connected to God, as we recognize and cherish the vital and holy connection with each other, in all that we do, whether private or public.

John Wesley said it best:

It is impossible for any that have it, to conceal the religion of Jesus Christ. This our Lord makes plain beyond all contradiction by a twofold comparison: “You are the light of the world. A city set upon a hill cannot be hid.” You Christians are the “light of the world” with regard both to your tempers and your actions. Your holiness makes you as conspicuous as the sun in the midst of heaven. As you cannot go out of the world, so neither can you stay in it without appearing to all humankind... so impossible it is to keep our religion from being seen, unless we cast it away. Sure it is, that secret, unobserved religion cannot be the religion of Jesus Christ. Whatever religion can be concealed is not Christianity.

Outward holiness – exhaling after inhaling the spiritual disciplines. Learning and claiming how to be publicly faithful, publicly holy, publicly a child of God and follower of Jesus Christ – this is our holy work, and our joyful task. God’s blessings this week!

