Decisions. Decisions. Decisions. Our lives are full of decisions. We all have to make them. We can’t escape them, because even to choose not to make a decision, is making a decision. So, on a daily basis, we all makes lots of decisions.

Take for instance the decisions you have had to make this morning. First, when your alarm clock went off you had to decide whether or not to get up. Then you had to decide what to eat for breakfast. Then you had to decide whether or not to come to church. Looks to me that all of you here made a good choice! Once you decided to come to church, you had to decide what to wear and what time to leave home. Perhaps you had to decide if you had time for another cup of coffee. And if so, do did you also have time to go to the bathroom again?

Then once you walked into the sanctuary, you had to decide where to sit. Well, some of you had to decide where to sit. Show of hands – how many of you are sitting more or less in the same place you sat this time last year? How about five years ago? That’s what I thought!

The point is, most of us have already had to make a fair number of decisions already this morning. Makes me tired just thinking about it! Many of these decisions were probably relatively easy to make – out of habit if nothing else. But what about the bigger decisions in life – like who to date or marry, where to live, what kind of work to do, who to hang out with, how to respond when you are in an argument or conflict, how to live into God’s purpose for your life? Wouldn’t it be nice if we had some simple rules to guide us?

Well, in the Old Testament God tried to keep things simple. He gave the Israelites one rule – called the Shema. "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might...” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) This one rule was to be their guiding rule of life every day from the time they got up until the time they went to bed. They were to teach it to their children. But, people being people, the Israelites went and complicated
things and came up with 613 laws they thought would help them keep this one rule. Trouble was keeping these laws became more important than the rule to love God.

Fast forward several thousand years to Jesus’ time. In the New Testament Jesus was asked which of these 613 laws was most important and he said, “Love the Lord your God with all you heart, mind, and strength.” Sounds familiar, right? Then he said, “and love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). So Jesus again tried to simplify things. He pared things down from 613 rules to 2. He said if we follow these two rules as our guiding principles in life, we can’t go wrong.

Well, again we humans complicated things. Over time the followers of Jesus, the Church, came up with all kinds of rules for the way Christians should live. And in the 1700’s, about the time of the Industrial Revolution, when the world and decision making were becoming increasingly complex, a man named John Wesley arrived on the scene in the Anglican Church. He started a movement called Methodism. People who heard him preach wanted to know more so they joined his small groups called Classes. They asked Wesley, “What do we need to do to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ?” And Wesley, following Jesus’ example, kept things simple. He gave them 3 rules to live by – do no harm, do all the good you can, and stay in love with God.

Over the next three Sundays we will be looking at these simple rules that will change the world, but I have to tell you, I believe that today we are starting with the hardest one first – DO NO HARM.

Now at first glance, it doesn’t seem that complicated. Pretty simple, right? Do no harm. After all, most of us don’t intentionally go out and do something to harm someone else. But I will tell you, if you take this simple rule at more than face value, you are going to be taking Christian living to another level - because to do no harm in all our encounters with others takes consistent application of a high degree of awareness, humility, integrity, and love.

To do no harm means that just as we understand we are precious children of God with sacred value, we must also consider our neighbors as precious children of God with sacred value. But the truth is sometimes we harm others just by not seeing them as people like you and me. Sometimes we
are content to live in our own little worlds surrounded by our family and friends and we barely see the people outside our own little circle. Perhaps there are some of us who are so busy and living life at such a pace that those outside our daily activities are simply a blur and by default are lumped into the category of “them.” There is me and my concerns and that is separated from them and their concerns. But in reality all humans share a lot of the same hurts and insecurities. And if we love our neighbor we will (with intention) be aware of this, recognize their sacredness, tread lightly, and do no harm.

To prove a point about how much we have in common, I would like to take a little informal survey. With a show of hands:

■ How many of you here today have been affected by cancer. That is, you have had cancer, had a family member who had cancer, or a close friend that had cancer?

See we have more in common than you think. Tread lightly. Do no harm.

■ How many of you know the pain of divorce either personally, or as parent of a child that has divorced or as a child of a parent that has divorced?

Tread lightly. Do no harm.

■ How many of you were affected by the recent recession we are only beginning to dig our way out of as a country?

Tread lightly. Do no harm.

■ How many of you are either Dallas Cowboy or Denver Broncho fans?

Tread lightly. Do no harm. My deepest sympathies. You’re in our prayers.

My point is, we in this room have more in common than we think besides the fact that we all come to church at Bethany. Likewise, we have more in common with the folks out there in our community than we think. And we have to be aware of this if we are to do no harm in our interactions with others. This simple rule then is a proactive response to all that is damaging and destructive to humankind and God’s good creation. This means that through our words and actions we work to avert evil BEFORE it ever
happens or takes root. (Rueben P. Job, Three Simple Rules That Will Change the World, pg. 33).

So what does it look like to do no harm? Well, Jesus said that it means we should not cause people to stumble – especially those we have no faith or are little ones in the faith (Matthew 18:6-7). In other words, don’t behave in such a way that people watching you might say, “If that is being a Christian, then I do not want any part of it.”

It would mean that when we find ourselves in an argument or conflict, we state our point of view without harsh or hurting words. It would mean we encourage rather than criticize. Sometimes it might mean that silence – holding our tongue – is the best response.

To do no harm would mean that we don’t manipulate people and situations so that circumstances work out in our favor to the detriment of someone else. In short, we don’t look out for ourselves at the expense of others. We don’t belittle others to make ourselves feel better. We don’t tear people down with criticism.

You know there is a saying that “Hurt people hurt people.” That is people who have been hurt or are wounded have a tendency to hurt other people. To make someone else feel bad. Makes them feel better. But the same could be said for forgiveness. Forgiven people forgive people. My friends you are forgiven, so be forgiving. Do no harm.

To do no harm might also mean that it would be more important to hear another person out with respect than to have the last word to prove we are right. It would mean we seek reconciliation instead of revenge.

Now for those who want to work on advanced degree in Do No Harm, I have a couple of challenging courses of action. To do no harm might mean you stop over-functioning for others and let them do things for themselves. A friend once told me this about raising my kids – “If they are not learning, you are not helping.” In other words, if I kept doing things for them, cleaning up their mistakes, trying to make things easy for them, I might actually be doing them harm because they were not learning to live in the world themselves. The same could be said for church families. Sometimes those of us who over-function need to take a step back. We can help others learn to do a task, encourage them to spread their wings, rather than taking the lead ourselves. I have to be honest. I have flunked and repeated this course many times.
Another advanced course in doing no harm would be learning to meet people with justice rather than charity. Charity implies that I have something you don’t, so let me help you. Charity puts me in a position of power; while you are made to feel powerless. But Justice says, “God loves us all, how can we meet as equals.” What steps can we take together that level the playing-field and our interactions be mutually beneficial? Maybe I have the resources to provide you with food, but what gift can you give in return so that you recognize your sacredness and self-worth – an hour of cleaning, gardening, painting? Instead of, “Let me help you;” let’s help each other and in the process make the world a better place to live.

As you can see, to do no harm takes diligent awareness and self-discipline. But I also believe it takes radical trust in God. A God that sent us an example to follow and a God that works for good.

Jesus came and showed us how to do no harm. He saw all people as valuable, even those society labeled as “less-than” – the lepers, the Samaritans, children, tax collectors, and prostitutes. He chastised those who thought otherwise. He worked to bring healing of body, mind, and spirit to the hurting. Jesus modeled for us a life that did no harm.

And we are confronted with his ultimate act of selflessness and trust each week when we come into this worship space. We are confronted with his commitment to do no harm and trust his heavenly father each time we see the cross. Jesus gave up his rights, did not defend himself, did not manipulate events to his benefit, and did not think himself better than us. And because he did no harm and trusted God’s plan, his choices brought redemption into the world.

When we make the decisions to do no harm and trust God, we have the potential to do the same thing – we have the potential to change the world. And we do this by walking in the footsteps Jesus and living in hid power and grace. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.