

Golden Rules

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, February 24, 2019

Scripture: [Luke 6:27–38](#)

Sermon

Are there other “golden rules” that you have encountered besides this one?

Using any part of our scripture as a rule has interesting challenges. Complexities of translation, of historical context, of subtle meanings lost through the ages. Yet, 1 in 10 Americans still most closely associate the word “rule book” with the Bible. ^[1]

Ironically, twice as many report that they read the bible when they need to solve a problem or need a direction to go in... so it seems like even if we're not sure it's going to give us an answer, we're more than glad to ask.

Today, we're continuing with Jesus's great sermon in the Gospel of Luke, the Sermon on the Plain. We started worship today with a modified version of the Beatitudes from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Today we continue in Luke's hard teaching... Love your enemies, Jesus says... and everybody around him and in the room today suddenly becomes an ethics PhD. We're looking all around for the complexities that might excuse us from well, a lot of our first instincts. (There are a bunch of complexities, and we'll get there) but we need to sit with just how difficult this sounds.

Love my enemies... Jesus, have you even met my enemies?

At the heart of this passage is the Lukan form of what we commonly call the Golden Rule these days, *Do to others as you would have done to you*. There are positive and negative forms of this that permeate almost every form of religion or ethics. This form of the rule is what we can put on our PhD hats and call “reflexively empathetic”: your action is to be guided by how you would like another to respond in some imagined future tense. Your own self-interest might guide your behavior to another. You can hear Jesus starting to poke at that a little bit here: “If you only do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?”

But, even more, in that focus on the self I think all too often we have found its future hope turned into the hell of the past: “Do to others what they have done to you.”

In Matthew, Jesus particularly calls this out saying, “You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you...”

It is one of the hardest teachings we have to learn that the shape of our lives is not limited to the sum of our reactions to others behavior.... That we are in some way, pilots of our lives, and can choose another way of responding. The way that Jesus invites us today.

Richard Rohr, 20th century

“If we do not transform our pain, we will transmit it.”

I used to be absolutely petrified of the open ground as a child. I would stick to sidewalks and paving stones like a kid possessed. the reason? if you grew up with the media that I did, open earth was like spinning a roulette wheel with the possibility you were going to die, pulled under by that menace of the action hero: **quicksand**. It turns out people have been tracking this, in the 1970's and 80's movies disproportionately involved scenes of people getting sucked into quicksand for some reason. If you don't know what this is, its a suspension of dirt in water that becomes what's called a “non-newtonian” solution, so when you press against it, it solidifies... making it even harder to extricate yourself. It turns out that its almost impossible to “drown” in quicksand like all those movies I saw as a kid... but it *is* true that you can get stuck in a material where the harder you push against it, the more you are trapped by it.

The reality is that our reactions to even healthy and natural challenge and conflict, which I'm going to hope is the most you can come up with for enemies, can often come with the quick desperation of one flailing in quicksand. Each move binding us up more and more. We see it in our families, our workplaces, our relationships...

Even more then, is the extreme that Jesus shows us... because there are just as many of us who have some experience of violence, of oppression and fear, of being degraded and diminished. The challenge is even greater there, because our default reactions as individuals, and as a community, are often to seek justice at “the end of a sword”, bind us more and more into cycles and systems of violence.

In quicksand, it turns out, you want to let your own body's buoyancy naturally and slowly move you to the surface until you can sidle your way out. The secret is to float.

See, Jesus is not creating a movement of door mats, here. It is not, “if someone strikes you on the cheek, just take it.” In fact, we must say that Jesus is talking about public acts of resistance or response, not private relationships. These words are not meant to tell victims of abuse and violence that they must stay with their abusers.

The invitation is not to passivity, but to actively resist violence and injustice with non-violent action. In both of the early examples here, the spell is to highlight the foolishness and dishonor of the oppressor: if you or people you love love Harry Potter books and movies, this is the spell *ridikulus!*, meant to take your deepest joy and use it to turn that which scares you into a thing fit to giggle at.

See, to turn the other cheek, and to remove one shirt after your coat has been taken... well, you end up making a fool of the oppressor. You end up hanging a lantern on their injustice for all to see, and all to understand their own fragility. It's the active way you free yourself from the quicksand of never

ending violence. It's what moves us to truly loving—the greek is *agape* love for the wholeness of being—all, enemies and friends. The word that gets translated *forgive* here is just as often *release*. We are invited to *release* one another as we have been *released*.

“Do to others as you would have done to you.” I also think we need to cling to our commitment to share this word with others who are in positions of power. For many of us, we do not know the sting or slap of injustice in the ways in which Jesus and his followers did. Even more then, we are challenged to speak so all might break free from that which holds us back.

This week saw another anniversary of the execution of Sophie Scholl and the White Rose movement of students who stood against Hitler in the height of World War 2. “The imperialist ideology of force, from whatever side it comes, must be shattered for all time.” ^[2]

I can't help but mention, in this last week of Black History Month, the way in which a generation of black folk (and friends and allies) made themselves, their very bodies, a statement against injustice they faced through non-violent confrontation. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial: “Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood,”

We remember these movements of the past, and we look with Jesus for movements of our present moment, realizing that when we are comfortable, protests in the face of injustice may be easy to turn away from as “ineffective” or “inappropriate”... but they are never meant to be; they are meant to make strange and silly, ineffective and inappropriate the never ending cycle of diminishment, violence, and vengeance... and invite us into a world of transformative love that stands bold in the face of those painful realities until they cannot stand their own fragility. Whenever I feel my instinct

Jesus invites us again and again to float over all that would bind us up into our own oppression, to make plain the foolishness of empire and violence, and make clear God's coming realm of compassion.

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1. [State of the Bible Report - 2015](#) ↩
 2. [White Rose - Leaflet 5, February 1943](#) ↩