

“The Golden Rule”
October 17, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

Ordinarily, I am a fan of inclusive language. Well, despite my proclivity toward testosterone, I try. Ordinarily, using language that isn't specifically masculine or feminine better conveys the wisdom of the Biblical message.

But here, in this text, an inclusive translation dilutes the intensity of Jesus' language. Referring to a generic 'anyone' or 'child' misses out on the paternal intensity of father and son.

What father would trick, cheat, deceive his own son? Only abusive fathers. Your son is hungry and wants bread, but dad, sick and abusive, gives him a stone which resembles a small biscuit.

Your son hungers for a meal of fish, but dad, teasing and taunting, gives him an eel to eat. Eels are unclean by kosher regulations.

We can hear this scripture as Jesus referring to a literal son and father, embracing that special bond of respect, obligation, loyalty that exists between dads and son. Equally, we can hear it as a metaphor, an allegory of a Young Christian needing what the Mature Christian can give him.

Would you cheat with stony hard-heartedness someone new to faith who is eager for the bread of life?

Would you give a serpent, something evil, to a young Christian eager for Jesus (for by the time Matthew's gospel was written the fish was a symbol of Christianity)?

Well, some pastors have, some Roman priests have. Power and entitlement will always corrupt.

But if you love, you will always give good gifts rather than cheat them, deceive them with bad gifts.

Listen: Matthew 7: 7-11

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

Having the guts to ask, to search, to knock means you're already on the way to getting. You're taking the risk. Have you ever had to go up to a strange door and knock in hope? You're being active. You're taking responsibility.

It all very similar to the old saying about the young student who came up to the Zen Master saying, "Master, I have a terrible temper and I need to control my anger." The Master replies, "You already have then."

If you show readiness, you're halfway there. You know what you are looking for.

Or it is similar to that other old saying that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. We've said before how physicians cannot heal but only establish the conditions for healing. The corollary applies to teachers: no teacher can teach; learners can learn.

If we -- imperfect, at times self-centered and impatient dads and moms -- willingly give what our children need, how much more so then your Father in Heaven? Because if you're asking, knocking, wanting, you're already there to receive what God gives, you're already open to the type of gifts the Sacred Reality can supply you in this imperfect, material world.

Now comes Jesus' punch-line, his summary of all that has been said so far:

Listen: Matthew 7: 12
"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you;
for this is the law and the prophets.

The Golden Rule.

But can we really name it a rule?

Yes, we can call it 'golden,' which suggest something excellent and valuable.

But a rule? A regulation with which we must comply?

It is far easier for us to comply with this Golden Rule as it is expressed elsewhere, in other religions, for the Golden Rule is one of those universal maxims:

Tobit, a Jewish book Jesus would have read, says: "*What you hate, do not do to anyone.*"

Confucius said: "*Never do to others what you would not have them do to you.*"

Hinduism records: "*One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self.*"

Notice how all of these are expressed as negatives, prohibitions; as 'do not's.'

Islam says from the Qu'ran something less negative but a little more self-grandiose:
"None of you truly are believers until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself. Seek for mankind that of which you are desirous for yourself."

Which can be a bit pushy if, for example, what you desire for yourself are submissive and obedient women. I can hear the Fundamentalist Imam say now, "Let's make sure all societies are determined by what I desire." I'm not worried. I'm quite certain that if women were required to wear burqas because some Imam desires it, some of the women I know might have a few choice things to say to him.

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Still, the negative form of the Golden Rule is much easier to obey.

How so? Negatives always are easier.

Do not kill your neighbor.

Okay, it's been a good day; I didn't kill John or Wendy across the street.

Do no harm.

Okay, that's cool; look, Glen -- I didn't cause my patient unnecessary pain.

Don't do ugly things.

Okay, I didn't paint graffiti on the World War II monument today. Isn't that wonderful?

Don't bully because you don't like being bullied.

Okay, what a good boy am I -- I didn't beat anyone up today or spread nasty rumors about them on twitter even though they probably deserved it..

Don't be rude because you don't want them to be rude to you.

Okay, aren't I wonderful? -- I didn't curse anybody out today even if they were slobs.

What a sad, calculating, flat, sterile way to live. No passion. All negative. There is no action on your part, just inaction. Hardly a great reason to wake up in the morning if that is all you are going to do.

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Jesus makes living a positive, finding a balance between clear cut fundamentalist code of conduct and wishy-washy moral relativism.

A rule to comply with? Or a vibrant attitude?

A yardstick by which to measure what you don't do? Or an incentive to do what Jesus wants you to do?

A precept to obey, parsing out what is legal, illegal, permissible, impermissible? Or a higher principle to direct you?

Since when have regulations ever saved us? Since when have prohibitions ever inspired us? Whenever have restrictions or threats ever made us moral?

As Ducky on NCIS explained, “An ethical man knows it is wrong to cheat on his wife; a moral man wouldn’t.”

I can be ethical but I’m not always moral. Which means we need faith to inspire us to be moral, and even more than moral: to be Christ-like. Remove the pot from the fire and it stops bubbling.

Yes, as others have described, the Golden Rule is a compelling attitude of goodwill. Surely less precise. The Golden Rule may be a universal maxim, but Jesus, as he does with all his words, makes it quite particular, surely demanding a moment by moment decision on our part as to what this authentically means. How exactly do we do unto others as we would have them do unto us?

Easier was when I simply didn’t do what I didn’t want others to do. Easier because then I am responding to what they don’t do. They’re setting the pace. I just have to copy them.

Yet, Jesus says forget that. It is not they who determine my actions, my behavior; better it is what I, not them, believe is right, as measured by what the Father in Heaven defines as right, as a good gift. To do right, I must first know what is right.

I am the actor, I determine how. Positively. I decide, situation by situation.

Erin Dailey heard this Golden Rule as a benediction one worship service. She thought about it and decided to help wash the dishes after coffee hour. That’s what she would have wanted.

Don’t just not hate, do good.

Don’t just avoid bullying them, respect them.

Don’t just not be rude, be encouraging.

Don’t just stop doing ugly things, do what is lovely and beautiful.

Don’t just not hate, love your neighbor.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you...it requires risk, it requires action.

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Here's the recipe for universal peace (as well as civil, worthwhile elections). Wouldn't it be great if everyone followed it?

Well, I will if you will.

Of course, that very reply contradicts most cowardly what Jesus says. Since when is my behavior contingent on what they do first? Since when is morality reciprocal?

Jesus makes it my responsibility. I make it Golden or I make it Dross. It depends on what I decide and do. I gave up being responsible and accountable for other people's actions and behaviors a long time ago. And that makes it a lot easier.