

Luke 6:27-38
February 20, 2022

The Golden Rule

Once again, we find ourselves in the great sermon, passed on to us in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is known as The Sermon on the Mount; in Luke, it is The Sermon on the Plain. Last week, we noticed both similarities and differences between the two, and in this reading from Luke that has in it what has come to be called, The Golden Rule, we find the same.

The Golden Rule is, of course, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” While it may not solve every moral and ethical question because people can differ in their ideas about how they would like others to treat them; we get the general idea, and can learn something from the contexts in which it is given in these two great biblical texts.

We have found it helpful to be aware of the context in which ideas are expressed. The context, in this case, means the contexts in the sermons. In the case of The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew), the Golden Rule is offered in the context of asking, seeking, and knocking. It comes after the instruction about prayer, fasting, and charitable giving, about not having anxiety and refraining from judgment against others.

In The Sermon on the Plain (Luke), the Golden Rule is offered in the context of the teaching of love for one’s enemies. The rule of love is the highest rule and supersedes all others. We know this to be true

because it is presented that way in gospel accounts in which Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment.

The answer comes not from one of the Ten Commandments, but is a summary of all the commandments taken from two texts, one from Deuteronomy 6 and the other from Leviticus 19. The greatest commandment is to love God supremely, with the whole self; and the second is the love of neighbor.

Teaching about love comes to us in a variety of ways in the bible. A few weeks ago we reflected upon a set of paragraphs in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, “Love is patient, love is kind . . . love never fails.” In another way it shows up in the books of the bible that are associated with John, “I give to you a new command, ‘love one another.’”

Love God, love neighbor, love one another, the greatest of these is love; I am glad it comes to us in a variety of ways. If we were told only to love one another and not also our neighbors, we might find it easier to neglect the well-being of those we do not consider a part of our families, our group. We may neglect our distant neighbors by defining them away, as in the question, “who is my neighbor?”

In order to dismiss every objection or qualification designed to diminish the force of this sacred, life-giving rule, Jesus taught that we should, “love our enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you.”

And in Luke, it is in the context of this difficult and challenging command to extend the rule of love even to our enemies, whomever they may be, and whatever may be required of us to achieve it, that we are also given the Golden Rule.

In Matthew's gospel, it comes on the heels of the encouragement to ask . . . seek . . . and knock. In that context we may hear it as an addendum to the teaching about prayer, that we should be mindful of others when we pray, even when we are praying for ourselves. The Scottish theologian of the mid-twentieth century, John Baillie offered the following prayer, "O God, bless all my plans and work, and help them to prosper. Do not let me hold on to any plan, or do any work, that I dare not ask you to bless?"

In Luke, The Golden Rule it is an act of love directed at one who is considered an enemy. We all have enemies. Some of them are connected to us by family relations, oddly enough, others because they are not connected to us as a part of larger groups we identify with.

These things may be defined a little differently for all of us, but the distinctions are still there and still have the power over us. You know the issues; country, political party, social class, sexual mores, race, religion, referring not only to people of other denominations (with whom, perhaps, we have learned to get along), but also those of other faiths, some that we understand less, like Islam, where there are hard realities and bad histories involved.

On some level, I believe, when we are told to love and bless our enemies, to go out of our way to do good to them, we know that we are being given the right instructions. Sometimes it may stretch us beyond our breaking point, but we know it is right.

In the context of that tension, the simple but universal rule is given; put yourself in their shoes, whomever they may be, risk learning enough about them to understand their perspective, and treat them the way you would like to be treated.

We call it "the Golden Rule," because it is precious, and difficult to achieve. It doesn't mean expecting others to treat *us* the way *we* would like to be treated. It doesn't mean failing to understand when others don't want to be treated the way we would like to be treated. We would like to be respected, even if not understood. We can extend that to others

Let it be our aspiration and our prayer, to work in the direction of living by the Golden Rule, out of love for God and each other, and for our neighbors, and yes for our enemies, and that just about covers everyone. And let us consider it in the larger context of the Grace of God, through which it has been revealed to us in Christ, by Christ. And not just the words but also the example of Christ, who loves and forgives and sacrifices for our life and salvation.