

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 20, 2022 (Epiphany 7C)**

This may not be popular, but I'm about to throw the Golden Rule under the bus. Now, I like the Golden Rule. Doing unto others as we would have them do unto us is a good thing, a holy thing. It's also something that transcends every boundary of faith. All the major religions have their version of the Golden Rule: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism. Every single one includes the Golden Rule in its scriptures. The idea of treating others as we want to be treated is the ultimate universal truth.

Jesus himself proclaims the Golden Rule as part of both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain. This morning we get the latter. Jesus channels thousands of years of moral teaching when he says quite plainly, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." There's not much wiggle room there.

The problem is, the Golden Rule doesn't go far enough. There's a certain implied reciprocity embedded within it. I will treat you a certain way because that's the way I want and expect to be treated. There's an implication of return. If I treat you generously, you will treat me generously. If I am merciful to you, you will be merciful to me. If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

But when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he takes this entire concept to the next level. He frames the Golden Rule by saying this: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

Jesus is saying, treat people a certain way, not because you expect similar behavior in return, but because this is how God treats you. God is merciful and generous and loving, so you should be generous and merciful and loving. And do it no matter how you're treated in return. Be merciful and generous and loving especially to those who hate you and curse you and abuse you.

And that's the rub. That's the hard part. That's the piece where it all breaks down for us. To treat people as we would have them treat us, yes. But even if they don't, even if they return evil for good, keep on loving them. Keep on treating them the way you would want to be treated. And do it not because this is how you yourself want to be treated, but because it's how God treats everyone. God's love must be the source of our behavior towards others, not our own self-interest.

So we should love one another not as we want to be loved, but as God loves us. And that changes everything. Because God's love is never conditional. God's love is never subject to review. God's love is never reliant upon certain behaviors or outcomes. God's love simply is.

And so if there was a single teaching of Jesus that had the potential to flip the world on its head right now, a teaching that would change the way we interact with one another, it would be the way he frames the Golden Rule: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." This call is life changing, *world* changing. And it doesn't come with any hedges or caveats. Jesus doesn't say, 'Love your enemies, unless

they *really* cross the line.’ Or ‘Love your enemies unless they post something offensive on Facebook.’

Jesus says simply and clearly and maddeningly, “Love your enemies.” Could you imagine if our deeply divided country actually embodied this teaching? What if we approached every interaction with love and compassion, rather than malice and suspicion? How might that change the ways we communicate and relate to one another? How might that impact our political discourse and our relationships with those with whom we disagree?

Now, most of us don’t have actual enemies. At least not in a dualistic, good vs. evil Superman vs. Lex Luthor kind of way. Or even in an antagonistic Road Runner vs. Wile E. Coyote kind of way. But we all have plenty of people that annoy us. Boy, do we have people that annoy us. And we all have people whose beliefs or practices or worldview doesn’t align with our own. People we don’t even necessarily know or associate with. The “those people” we like to lump together into a nameless, faceless crowd. It’s so much easier to tear down people and ideas when we’re able to dehumanize them. That’s certainly the bread and butter of cable news shows and social media. “Those people” may be out of sight, but they’re certainly not out of mind.

But Jesus wants us to love even them and bless even them and pray for even them. And I encourage you to actually do this. Not just in a dismissive “thoughts and prayers” way, but by getting down on your knees and praying fervently and without ceasing. We may not be able to change the world with small acts of love and prayer, but we can start by changing ourselves. We can change the tone. And that’s a good place to start.

Imagine what our current political climate would look like if we treated one another as God treats us. There would be no vilification or dehumanization. There would be no racist tropes or fear mongering. If we treated one another as fellow children of God rather than as punching bags, we might actually do some good in this world. The thing is, God didn’t create humankind so that we would all agree with one another. God created us to love one another. And with that love comes peace and compassion, justice and joy.

You know, our baptismal covenant doesn’t offer any caveats or conditions. It doesn’t say, ‘Respect the dignity of every human being...as long as they agree with you.’ Or ‘Seek and serve Christ in all persons...unless they really get under your skin.’ None of this is easy, of course. Which is why the answer is always, “I will, *with God’s help*.” We can’t always do this by ourselves, nor are we asked to do so.

Perhaps Jesus’ framing of the Golden Rule finds its fullest expression in the New Commandment Jesus offers us at the Last Supper. “Love one another as I have loved you.” Love one another, not because you expect something in return or because it will make life easier or more pleasant. Love one another because Jesus himself has loved us. Unconditionally and completely and with reckless abandon. Ultimately, that’s why we treat others with love and respect. Because God first loved us and continues to love us and will always love us.

My friends, the Golden Rule is an excellent credo by which to interact with our fellow children of God in this life. But only when we turn things around and begin with God rather than

ourselves as the primary actor, will we be able to most fully live together as God's beloved children.

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