

“Do Unto Others”

Luke 6:27-33

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It's called the Golden Rule -- “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Hands down, it is the best known saying of Jesus. The sentiment is not unique to Jesus – similar sayings are found in other ancient cultures. One writer catalogues its myriad permutations this way:

“The Hindu religion taught: ...Do naught to others which if done to thee would cause thee pain (*The Mahabharata*). The Buddhist religion taught: Hurt not others with that which pains yourself (*Udana-Varga*). The Jewish traditions taught: What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow men. ...(*The Talmud*). ... [Confucius taught]: Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire (*Analects*, 15.24). (Executable Outlines, copyright Mark A.Copeland, 2006, [http://www.ccel.org/contrib/exec\\_outlines/mt/mt\\_19.htm](http://www.ccel.org/contrib/exec_outlines/mt/mt_19.htm))

It is a universal rule for living, no? But there is one crucial difference. All the world's religions say: “*Don't* do to others what you don't want done to you.” But Jesus says: “*Do* unto others what you would have them do to you.” The difference actually has a name. The negative version is called “The Silver Rule.” It is an attitude of restraint, something akin to the Hippocratic oath: “First, do no harm.” Jesus' teaching is, instead, pro-active: “*Do* good; *be* merciful, as God has been merciful to you.”

Do unto others..... It is not wildly hard to do for those who are adorable. When [at the eleven o'clock service] we baptize six babies this morning, we experience a flood of endorphin-induced affection toward these little ones.

And it is not usually hard to act kindly towards our not-always-adorable families. “Do unto others” means loving my household, even when they drive me slightly crazy. I know the feeling is mutual. But we love one another nonetheless, and strive to treat each other with the same forbearance we desire for ourselves.

And it is not even unheard of to love the stranger in need. “Do unto others” takes flesh in the tremendous mission work that we do, through this church and in our civic volunteering. We fulfill the Golden Rule when we care for the poor through our time and prayers and money.

But it is a much harder enterprise to “do unto others” when the object of our feelings is our *enemy*. Which is, of course, precisely what Jesus asks us to do. Today, I want to focus on what it might mean for us to love ... to love those who are hardest to love.

Let’s not be naïve. Loving an enemy is extraordinarily difficult. When you’re attacked, you want to retaliate. When a friend at school suddenly turns her back on you, you feel betrayed and angry. When an insurance company flatly denies you necessary tests, you want to strike out. When an enemy threatens you — your natural reaction is vengeance. But we are commanded instead to love. It is *not easy*. The work of love is arduous and urgent. Arduous, because it goes against human nature. And urgent, because the alternatives are tragic.

I don’t need to tell you that violence and evil are everywhere: from domestic violence down the street to bombings across the Israeli-Palestinian border, from ethnic fighting in Iraq and Congo and Darfur, to the streets of Chicago, where twenty-three school children have been killed this year alone. We are vulnerable to violence, all of us. Not just to the immediate impact of violence, but to its corrosive power to multiply itself exponentially in anger and retaliation.

Retribution may be satisfying, but it spawns more hatred in its wake ... more hatred, more violence, more humiliation. The father who beats his child often had been beaten up himself. The taunted outcast builds up a rage that explodes in suicide or homicide. The casual violence of verbal assaults on race, on gender, on income — they create a nastiness that infects the whole society. The history of conflict is paved with stepping stones of action and reaction, assault and retaliation. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his assassination we marked this year, Dr. King once said it this way: “The ultimate

weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral bettering the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.”

When we are attacked it takes tremendous courage not to retaliate. We discovered that as a nation following the attacks of September 11. In the days following the terrorist assault, I wrote these words:

“There is potential ... for this enormous act of violence to unleash more violence, through ... indiscriminate hatred against Arabs and Muslims. There is potential for us to be deeply divided by this tragedy, to heap [blame at leaders with whom we disagree]. And there is potential for our country to steel ourselves with unilateral determination, seeking solace in a defiant isolationism and overwhelming power. It is a vulnerable and formative time .... What will become of us?” (personal records)

Nearly seven years later, we are still deciding what will become of us, who we are, and what we stand for. But as *Christians*, we are already handed our answer: we are to love our enemies ... we are to be merciful just as our heavenly Father is merciful ... we are to do unto others as we would have them do to us.

Now I want to acknowledge that it is extraordinarily difficult at times like this to separate our obligations to country from our obligations to Christ. Yet we know when Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” he was clear that our ultimate accountability lies not in allegiance to the state, but in allegiance to Almighty God. And this we also know: with much power comes much responsibility. As Christians who live in the mightiest nation on earth, we have a tremendous obligation: *we must match our unequalled power with an equal measure of morality*. No matter how much “might” we possess, without the power of moral suasion, we are weak indeed. Whatever the gains in intelligence might be, America’s beacon of freedom and human rights has been dimmed by our positions on rendition, torture, and the suspension of *habeas corpus*. It’s not just a matter of world opinion – about whether other nations *like* us: it’s a matter of the good we can accomplish. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we led the world as an example of generosity, selflessness, and liberty. The Marshall Plan was an unprecedented

generosity to our very enemies. We lifted the aspiration of millions. We protected the poor and demanded international justice. What we do or not do as Christians always matters; what we do as *American* Christians matters even more because of the power that we hold in our hands.

We have a choice to make. We have to decide which we will live by: the power of retaliation or the power of love. If we choose love, we will choose it because it is right; not because it is expedient. And it may just turn out that love is not the naïve choice that it appears to be, but strategic and powerful indeed.

The contrast between Zimbabwe and South Africa could not be more stark. Mugabe systematically and brutally commandeered the farms of whites in his land, which resulted in tragically inadequate food supplies, ongoing violence, and now, in the wake of elections, near anarchy. Mandela, even after twenty-seven years in jail, oversaw the reconstruction of his nation through the painstaking work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He wrote,

“It is crucial that we keep remembering that negotiations, peace talks, forgiveness, and reconciliation happen most frequently not between friends, not between those who like one another. They happen precisely because people are at loggerheads and detest one another as only enemies can. But enemies are potential allies, friends, colleagues, and collaborators. This is not just utopian idealism. The first democratically elected government of South Africa was a government of National Unity made up of members of political parties that were engaged in a life-and-death struggle. ... If it could happen there, surely it can happen in other places. Perhaps God chose such an unlikely place deliberately to show the world that it can be done anywhere” (*No Future without Forgiveness* (NY: Doubleday, 1999), p. 280).

Love your enemies, Jesus tells us ... not just for our own sake but for the sake of the world. It is the most powerful witness we can make. And it is my conviction that just as retaliation spawns more hatred in its wake ... more hatred, more violence, more humiliation ... so also love will yield more

compassion, seeding and multiplying itself, grace upon grace, with its impact. “Give and it shall be given to you,” Jesus tells us, “pressed down, shaken together, running over.” The impact of love, especially for the enemy, is a breathtaking witness.

It was almost two years ago that a deadly school shooting racked a tiny farm community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The news reported it this way:

“In just about any other community, a deadly school shooting would have brought demands from civic leaders for tighter gun laws and better security, and the victims' loved ones would have lashed out at the gunman's family or threatened to sue. But that's not the Amish way.

”As they struggle with the slayings of five of their children in a one-room schoolhouse, the Amish in this Lancaster County village are turning the other cheek [and] urging forgiveness of the killer. “The hurt is very great,” [one researcher] said. “But they don't balance the hurt with hate.”

”In the aftermath of Monday's violence, the Amish ... have also been reaching out to the family of the gunman, Charles Carl Roberts IV, 32, who committed suicide during the attack.

(<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/10/04/national/main2059816.shtml>)

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” Jesus said. The Golden Rule is easier in some cases than in others. When it comes to loving our enemies, it is arduous indeed: the faceless enemy on the other side of the world ... or the enemy we know, on the other side of the fence or even the other side of the room. But if Christianity stands for anything at all, it stands for this: it stands for love. Not cheap or sentimental love, but love that treats the enemy with costly compassion, and not vengeance. St. Paul once said it this way: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ... Do not repay evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:14, 17, 21). Amen.