

February 24, 2019
Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
Luke 6: 24-36
Rev. Chip Whitacre

“Do unto others as you would be done by.” That was my mom’s rendering of the Golden Rule. I recall her quoting it frequently when I was growing up. I don’t recall why she quoted it in my presence so frequently. But I remember hearing it a lot. Most of us have grown up hearing it or some form of it, even if we were not raised as Christians. That’s because most religions and philosophies include some version of it. We find it as “love your neighbor as yourself” in Leviticus (19:17-18) and Deuteronomy (6:4-5). In Tobit we hear it as “what you hate do not do to anyone”. And of course, it is in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. In today’s reading it Jesus is using it as a connector between a story in two parts. To tie together the things we do in relationships and the attitudes we bring to relationships. All while providing vivid examples of what it means to love your neighbor.

In the first part of the reading, Jesus tells his listeners how they should respond to what amounts to acts of violence. And it’s a pretty daunting list of demands. Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, turn the other cheek, give to everyone who begs. Our first thought is likely that these are impossible standards. Well beyond our capacity to achieve. We might even go so far as to conclude that Jesus wasn’t really being serious. That he was just engaging in his usual hyperbole to get our attention. And that is where a cautionary note is in order. Certainly, Jesus does not expect us to live in abusive relationships. Or to endure violence without complaint or defense. But I think Jesus does expect us to take his teaching seriously. I think he does indeed expect us to be mindful of not responding in kind to the slights that we incur. Nevertheless, we must admit that he has captured our attention with his list of expectations.

But then Jesus interjects the Golden Rule. And I think he’s using it as a sort of pivot point in his teaching. It’s like he’s looking back over the list of expectations he has just given his listeners and adding a final point. Not only does he expect that they won’t respond in like manner to the affronts that people heap on them. But he expects that they won’t be the person who curses, abuses, hates and slaps others as well. But at this point, Jesus turns his attention to other aspects of relationships. Up to now in the story Jesus has been focused on actions and reactions in relationships. He’s teaching his disciples that their conduct doesn’t need to be, indeed should not be determined by the actions of others.

But right after the Golden Rule he pivots and focuses his attention on the attitudes and expectations we bring to relationships. If we only love those who we know will love us back, we are not loving fully as God loves us all. If we only do good with the expectation that good things will be done for us, we are treating relationships as transactions. If we only give or lend to someone with the expectation, we will get something in return, then we are not really giving. In effect he is asking his disciples to consider why they do good. Is it for others, without consideration for receiving something in return. Or is it for themselves? On the surface the question doesn’t seem as difficult as the admonitions in the first section of the story. But I think that is because of the way it is presented.

In Matthew's rendering of this story the guilty parties are tax collectors and gentiles. They are perfect foils for the predominately Jewish audience that Matthew is thought to be addressing. Their status in the community serves as a contrast to the behavior Jesus is seeking. But Jesus is engaging in a little stereotyping. Using their status in the community to reinforce his point. All are worthy of our love because all are loved by God. Luke's use of "sinners" instead of tax collectors and gentiles opens up the possibilities for comparison. We can imagine Luke choosing to use that term to soften the impact of Jesus teaching to his predominately gentile audience. But sinner is a general term. It doesn't define a status in the community or a particular behavior. It begs the question, who exactly are the sinners? And of course, we have an answer for that. It's those people who don't do what Jesus expects. Those people who only associate with and care for those from whom they can expect something in return. Those people. And there we stand. On the thin ice of judgment.

Whether intended or not Luke's use of the more general term creates a dilemma for us. Sinners has to mean someone. And we tend to resist using the term while looking in the mirror. So, we are tempted to engage in our own bit of stereotyping. Looking around for potential candidates. And the possibilities are endless. Whatever group of people that doesn't look, talk, act, eat, or think like we do, can be a target. Every fear or prejudice we have collected over the course of our lives provides potential candidates. To really make it interesting there are those around who manufacture candidates for us. People that others want us to dislike or distrust or fear. If we buy into that, it is easy drift into the type of behavior that Jesus is warning us about. Until it becomes a habit. And we are no longer taking Jesus seriously.

There is a story from Jewish tradition about a pagan who goes to Rabbi Shammai and asks to be made a proselyte. The only condition he has is that the Rabbi teach him all of the Torah while he is standing on one foot. Rabbi Shammai responds by chasing him away with his walking stick. The pagan goes next to Rabbi Hillel. And Rabbi Hillel tells him: What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it.

Likewise, we might summarize the whole of the Gospel as the greatest commandment as Jesus taught. It is certainly something that can be taught while standing on one foot. But Jesus wants us to live it too, and that is where the challenge comes in.

Amen.