

Denice K. Leslie  
October 21, 2007  
21<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Duet. 6: 1 – 9  
Mark 12: 28 – 34

### “The Golden Rule”

Mr. Lee had a substantial weight problem. So his doctor put him on a diet.

She told him, "I want you to eat regularly for two days, then skip a day, and repeat this procedure for two weeks. The next time I see you, you'll have lost at least five pounds."

When Mr. Lee returned, he shocked the doctor by having lost nearly 60 pounds. "Why, that's amazing!" the doctor said. "Did you follow my instructions?"

Mr. Lee nodded. "I'll tell you though, I thought I was going to drop dead that third day."

"From hunger, you mean?"

"No, from skipping."

One more:

You've heard the Golden Rule? *"Them that has the gold makes the rules."*<sup>1</sup>

At least that is the way it is in today's world. Which is why it is all the more important for us as followers of the Way of Jesus to remember that Jesus teaches us a different Golden Rule: Love one another as I have loved you.

I mean if you had the task of creating the perfect law, what would it be??

"Nobody's ever done better than the Golden Rule. There are hundreds of versions of it - positive versions and negative versions: love your neighbor as yourself, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Do not do unto others as you would not want them to do unto you.... The point, (the Golden Rule) is not what is commonly called a categorical imperative.

Environmental Biologist, Jay Gould says, "I don't like categorical imperatives, the absolute

rules, the ones we get so righteous about that we kill people over them.

But the Golden Rule is a so-called hypothetical imperative, contingent upon what you do in negotiation, in relation with others. Those are the only sensible 'rules' in a complex world."<sup>2</sup>

This is how Jesus did it. In the story of the Rich Young Ruler, the young man comes to Jesus and tells him he has kept all of the law and the commandments. Jesus affirms him, but the man isn't satisfied. He wants to know what he lacks. He obviously feels he is lacking something—in his own mind, heart and soul, he understands that what he's accomplished so far isn't asking enough of him or has not truly had an impact on his life.

And so Jesus says to him, "If you wish to be perfect, then go, sell your possessions, and give your money to the poor and come and follow me..."

Jesus recognized that the man, in all of his religious well-being was cut off from human interaction that demanded something of him—challenged him to not only accept the law and the commandments in his affluent, insulated environment surrounded by others like himself—but with people who needed him.

And whom HE needed in order to truly know God. He was in search of more than his lifestyle provided—that intangible something that brings meaning to life.

As one Russian disciple said, "The question of bread for myself is a material question, the question of bread for my neighbor is a spiritual question."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus comes to demonstrate and teach us that love is what gives meaning to life—what brings God's presence to bear on the world. What alone among all other powers is able to transform the inhumane into the human—hate into forgiveness,

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<sup>2</sup> -Interview of evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould by Rebecca Scheib, Utne Reader, September-October 1997, 100.

<sup>3</sup> --Nikolai Berdyaev

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<sup>1</sup> No idea.

violence into peace, fear into trust. That can't happen except in real circumstances between real people.

God is relational. It's our relationships that give meaning to life. I say that in nearly every funeral and memorial service I preach. It is in our compassionate, loving interactions with our neighbor that spiritual depth is to be found. To do unto others as I would want others to do unto me, to love my neighbor as myself is not only to love God but to know the love of God.

C.S. Lewis said, “Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he (or she) is your Christian neighbor, (that person) is holy in almost the same way, for in him or her also, Christ ... is truly hidden.”<sup>4</sup>

“A Turkish officer raided and looted an Armenian home. He killed the aged parents and gave the daughters to the soldiers, keeping the eldest daughter for himself.

Some time later she escaped and trained as a nurse. As time passed, she found herself nursing in a ward of Turkish officers.

One night, by the light of a lantern, she saw the face of this officer. He was so gravely ill that without exceptional nursing he would die. The days passed, and he recovered. One day, the doctor stood by the bed with her and said to him, “But for her devotion to you, you would be dead.” He looked at her and said, “We have met before, haven't we?” “Yes,” she said, “We have met before.” “Why didn't you kill me?” he asked. She replied, “I am a follower of him who said 'Love your enemies.'”<sup>5</sup>

Love your enemies—do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love God with all your

heart, mind and strength *AND your neighbor as yourself*. The Golden Rule.

“... love is not the sure path that will take us to our good end, but is instead the reward we receive at the end of the hard road that is our life and the days of our life.”<sup>6</sup>

Loving God and loving neighbor is the greatest test of faith we have in the real world where violence, inhumanity and power are the virtues of many if not most.

One of my favorite theologians, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott helps me understand how we can live out the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves even when our neighbor is our enemy.

She says, “*Jesus makes it all possible. Jesus is my Savior in the sense of making it all possible. Jesus is the one who never forgot that he and the sacred Source were one.*

She tells us, *That's what I'm trying to remember: that I and my sacred Source are also one.*

*Jesus talked about not speaking his own words, but speaking the words of the One who sent him. He prayed that we all would know that oneness that he felt with the Source.*

And she concludes, *Human cruelty stems from forgetting who we are. We are intended to treat each other lovingly, with respect, and cherish the image of God in each other.*<sup>7</sup>

This is what the world desperately needs to know in our day as much as in the past.

Sociologist Rodney Stark says,

“The ultimate factor in the rise of Christianity were its ideas.

‘The simple phrase, *For God so loved the world*, would have puzzled an educated pagan,

<sup>4</sup> -C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis: Readings for Meditation and Reflection (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 38.

<sup>5</sup> --L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 265-266.

<sup>6</sup> -Norman Mailer, *The Gospel According to the Son* (New York: Random House, 1997), 241.

<sup>7</sup> —Virginia Mollenkott, “Who Is Jesus?” *Questions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 50.

The notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd.’

To the Greco-Roman world, mercy was a character flaw; the ideal was justice.

Stark adds, ‘Since mercy involves providing unearned help or relief, it was contrary to justice,

This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues -- that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful.

Moreover, the corollary that because God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they love one another was something entirely new.

Perhaps even more revolutionary was the principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe, indeed, that it must even extend beyond the Christian community.”<sup>8</sup>

If we pride ourselves on our Christian virtues then we will not tolerate abuse of others, even our enemies because we love our neighbors as ourselves. We will live another way. The way of Jesus.

In our fear of terrorism we Americans have permitted ourselves to justify all kinds of human abuse that under other circumstances would repulse us. That we would consider beneath us. That we would shake our heads over in other nations who we wish followed our American ideals..... Because we believe we stand for a different way. We fought WWII to save the world from just this kind of abuse of power and disregard of human beings. How can we so crassly dishonor the memory of so many fallen heroes who gave their lives and are giving their lives for these same high ideals by what we now justify in the name of freedom and democracy.

We forget that when we succumb to that which is inhumane we become no better than those we deplore. We are called to a higher way.

To a different way. Life is not about the quantity of it, or the stuff of it,—but the quality of it.

If we, who claim to follow Jesus, in our fear give in and give up what it is that makes and keeps human life human, then we are among the most to be pitied because we are dead in our sin.

Life, real life, life as God intends for it to be and provides for us in Jesus Christ is about love of neighbor as ourselves. Otherwise there is no life for anyone. This what Jesus died for.

Or I should say, who.

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<sup>8</sup> --Paul Galloway, "How Jesus Won the West: Christianity became dominant because it offered better ideas