

**Sunday, February 20, 2022**  
**Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)**

Genesis 45.3-11, 15; Luke 6.27-38

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

**“Sharing the Gift of God’s Love”**

Today’s Gospel reading is a continuation of the Sermon on the Plain which we began last week. As you (hopefully) recall, Jesus starts this sermon with a series of four “blessed are” statements and four counterbalancing “woe to you” statements. I ended my sermon on Jesus’ sermon by noting that his words are intended to be a tool, a guide, to help us assess where we are in our lives and how that affects our lives of faith. How where we are affects our relationship with God and with one another. That we are invited to live a Christ-centered life by finding ways to be a blessing to others, and that in so doing, we ourselves are blessed. In today’s Gospel, Jesus shifts his focus, moving from the theoretical to the practical: providing instruction on how to live a blessed life. And it all boils down to love. Although, I’m sure you have gathered from what we just heard, this is easier said than done.

Perhaps the best-known portion of our lesson for today is “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Lk 6.31). Commonly referred to as the Golden Rule. This was not something new to Jesus. It was actually a pretty common maxim across the ancient world. Most, if not all, religions have a comparable teaching. So fundamental to so many cultures and areas of human life, academics have sought to expand the understanding and scope of the Golden Rule by explaining it from such diverse perspectives and fields of study as psychology, philosophy, sociology, human evolution, and economics. So universal, so fundamental to the operations of religious systems and secular societies alike. Such a simple concept, and yet, perhaps one of the harder rules for us humans to follow. Likely because it is contingent upon setting aside our own perceived self-interests.

Sure, the Golden Rule sounds good in theory. Treating others the way we want to be treated. We all want to be treated nicely. With compassion. To be treated with dignity and respect. Until you get to what that looks like in practical application, when we have to treat others nicely, with compassion, with dignity and respect. Look at what Jesus is suggesting. What he is commanding. Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. If someone takes your coat, give them your shirt, as well. Give to everyone who begs from you. If anyone takes away your goods, do not ask to have them returned. I would venture to say that most, if not all of us, have dealt with one or more of these circumstances, or with comparable situations, at some point in our lives. And what did that feel like?

Being abused or mistreated? Having things taken away and not returned? Being disrespected, even hated? Feels pretty icky, doesn’t it? It can be demoralizing. It can affect our sense of self-worth. As if that is not bad enough, we are then to love those who did those things to us? We are to treat them nicely? We are to show them compassion? After what they did to us? After how they treated us? That can be difficult, if not downright impossible. Even doing something

like praying for those who have harmed us in any way can be really hard. If we can even bring ourselves to do that.

There are certainly those times when, we think of relationships as being transactional. Someone does something nice to me, I reciprocate. I do something kind for someone else, I expect something comparable in return. So naturally, the opposite seems to be valid. Someone harms or mistreats me, I want to reciprocate. Only fair, right? After all, a sense of fairness, the notion of reciprocity, seems to be an inherent part of the Golden Rule. And yet, Jesus himself refutes this notion of the reciprocity of love. And likewise, of its opposite. He makes it clear that the love he has in mind is anything but fair. At least as we might define it. Jesus says, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same" (Lk 6.33). As one commentator notes, "Jesus' critique of reciprocity (*even sinners do that!*) makes clear that 'fair' is precisely what true love is not. Rather, true love goes above-and-beyond reciprocity. In this sense, Jesus is recommending an 'unfair' kind of love, an extravagance that benefits not the one who benefits you, but the one who opposes you; or indeed, that gives more to a thief than the thief takes in the first place!"<sup>1</sup>

What Jesus is asking us to do is to rethink our understanding of love. To rethink our understanding of what it means to be in relationship, particularly with those whom it might be a little difficult to be in relationship. He is asking us to view love, to view our relationships, the way God views them. Jesus outlines new behaviors and attitudes that flow from the understanding of what it means to be blessed. New behaviors and attitudes that flow from the understanding that we are all blessed by God and are all beloved children of God. As one commentator notes, "These new attitudes flow from Jesus' image of God as the merciful Father, whose own practices are not stingy or calculated but lavish and full of grace."<sup>2</sup>

The creation story in Genesis talks about how we are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1.26). For millennia, theologians have debated just what that means. We know that being made in the image and likeness of God does not mean that we physically look like God. But it does mean that we have the capacity for various qualities and attributes that God has. While there are so many to choose from, one that best describes God is that ours is a loving God. Not just that God loves, but that God is love. If we are made in the image and likeness of God, we too, have the capacity of love. Of course, we know that. But we are not just talking about the love shared between friends. Not even the love shared between family members or between spouses. We are talking about the unconditional love that God has for us. The unconditional love that God has demonstrated throughout salvation history. Even to the point of becoming human just to be with us. Even to the point of dying for us so that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Being made in the image and likeness of God means that we also have the capacity for unconditional love. Something Jesus invites us to explore through the Sermon on the Plain and the Golden Rule. As we hear in today's Gospel reading: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6.36). Pointing to just one of the facets of God's unconditional love. God's unconditional love is often manifest through compassion and mercy. Through forgiveness. Which is yet one more quality that Jesus himself identifies: "Forgive, and you will be forgiven"

(Lk 6.37). Or perhaps more aptly, as the Apostle Paul put it, “just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col 3.13). We know that no matter how much we mess up, God still loves us. That God is always compassionate and merciful toward us. That God forgives us. Compassion, mercy, and forgiveness all being components, all being part, of what it means to love as God loves. All part of the Golden Rule.

Our Old Testament reading from Genesis provides an example of loving as God loves. What we heard today is the beginning of the end of the story of Joseph, who years before had been sold into slavery by his brothers. Through God’s grace, Joseph eventually becomes the highest-ranking official in Pharaoh’s government, with vast wealth and power. When he is reunited with his brothers, rather than taking revenge for what they did to him decades before, Joseph chooses to have mercy on them. To have compassion. Rather than recognizing his brothers’ cruelty, rather than holding a grudge and seeking revenge, Joseph was able to see God at work. To see how God’s love works. And to respond out of that example of God’s love.

The Golden Rule and all that Jesus presents in today’s Gospel are powerful teachings. Such teachings, precisely because they are so powerful, are vulnerable to distortion. And hence, come with a caution label. Application of the Golden Rule and the types of examples Jesus cites—turning the other cheek, not seeking return of things that are taken, and the like—need to be considered very carefully. As is often the case, Jesus sometimes uses hyperbole—extreme situations—to grab the attention of his audience and to make his point. Real-life application cannot, must not, be blind to the realities of specific circumstances. Some of what is presented could be falsely construed as requiring the remaining in or not fighting against unjust, even abusive situations. This is not what Jesus is saying. Because true love, the love that God has—which is the model for the love we are to have for one another—is not abusive. True love does not allow the continuation of abuse. True love seeks to end abuse, to heal the abused, and to reform the abuser. Likewise, true love seeks to end the cycle of violence or negativity or whatever gets in the way of loving and healthy relationship. That is the ultimate purpose of the Golden Rule. To foster healthy, loving relationship wherever possible.

Jesus has commanded us to live according to the Golden Rule. He has commanded us to follow the model of the love that God has shown us throughout our lives. We hold this tremendous power in our hands. To do to others as we would have them do to us. To seek to love others as we want to be loved. As we have been and are loved by God. Of course, it is not always easy. But then again, Jesus would not have put this before us if he did not have faith in us. Faith that we can do the hard work of showing the world what God’s love truly looks like. Jesus promises that if we do this, our reward will be great. What better reward, what greater blessing, can there be than sharing God’s unconditional love in a world so in need of that precious gift?

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<sup>1</sup> “Grace in Action: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany Week Seven,” SALT, February 13, 2022.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/2/19/grace-in-action-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-7>.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1865.