



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## When the Golden Rule Hits the Real World

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

February 15, 2009

*Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)*

Luke 6:27-36

Little Karen was just about to hit her even littler sister when her mother came up and said, “Now, Karen, don’t forget the Golden Rule: ‘Do to others what you would have them do to you.’” Just at that moment Karen realized that the rule she’d grown up with had trouble when faced with the so-called real world. It would have been much easier to just haul off and clobber her sister, but now here was this great eternal truth being pounded into her skull: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

I suspect you know what that’s like. You know how this saying—like most splendid principles—can come up a little bit short when you start searching for a practical application. At one level, almost everyone will tout the Golden Rule as the one great moral truth that structures society. The Golden Rule, many will say, is the key to life—to getting along with other people, to being successful, to being happy. It’s rare to find someone who doesn’t believe the truth proclaimed by the Golden Rule.

And yet... You knew that was coming, didn’t you? And yet, for a rule so thoroughly cherished, it’s sure been tarnished by our practice—or lack of practice, as the case may be.

You can tell by the way we’ve joked about this rule that we have trouble doing what it asks. Have you heard these versions? “Do unto others just exactly what they’ve done to you.” Or, “Do unto others *before* they do unto you.” Or, perhaps my favorite, “Do unto others and then run.” Perhaps some of you have lived by these not-so-golden rules. If the truth were to be told, these alternate versions are more true to life for us than perhaps we care to admit.

After all, if you really listen to what Jesus says in the gospel reading this morning, you’ve got to realize that his words seem to make little sense. The economic plan proposed, as well as the peace-making strategy just wouldn’t hold much water today. Can you imagine the reaction in Washington if someone were to quote Jesus in the midst of the bailout hearings? “Remember what Jesus said,” they might argue, “‘Give to everyone who begs.’” And let’s not forget what else he said, my fellow senators, ‘Lend, expecting nothing in return.’”

Ridiculous. The ideas given might be nice moral thoughts, but do you really think they’d hold up in today’s world? In fact, we wouldn’t even listen to these words except for one thing—they come to us from the lips of Jesus. They come to us from the very Word of God made flesh, the one who shows us what God is like. And when Jesus talks, we listen.

The basic statement is simple enough. This whole passage is built upon the central idea of loving your enemies. It has to do with praying for those who persecute you, blessing those who curse you, doing good to those who hate you. Jesus, of course, wasn’t the

first person or the last to come up with the grand idea of loving enemies. Countless people have advocated such a way of life. But there is a significant difference in Jesus' understanding of the importance of love for all people—including your enemies. He bases that idea not upon some moral reasoning—some great cosmic logic that greases the wheels of community and getting along—but he grounds the idea of love for the enemy and blessing those who hate you upon God. Jesus doesn't just invite us to do these difficult things because they're good ideas. No, he reminds us that we should do all of these things because these are the things God has done for us—expecting nothing in return.

Do you want to understand this passage? Then we're going to have to reshape our understanding of love. We today—especially on this pinnacle weekend of sentimental, schmaltzy love—with Valentine's Day falling just yesterday—we have a bunch of sentimental feelings about love. We've turned love into a feeling—sort of a fuzzy feel. You can hear it in our speech, "Every time I'm around her my heart just flutters." Or, "I get the best feeling when I'm with him; I know it's love." We Americans have turned love into nothing more than a feeling, and that's a dangerous thing.

You know why it's dangerous to make love about feelings? Because feelings get hurt—that's why. When we base our love for another person upon their treatment of us, then we've set ourselves up to get hurt. And when we do that, all of our love becomes conditional love. In other words, I'll keep on loving you as long as you keep on loving me. Or I'll keep on loving you as long as you agree with my politics or my theology. Or I'll keep on loving you as long as you do the things I expect.

A friend of mine once witnessed this sort of conditional love taken to the extreme. He was grocery shopping when he overheard a woman's voice from the next aisle saying, "Mommy doesn't love you." Those words made him stop and listen. "Mommy loves you." That's better, he thought. "Mommy doesn't love you." "Mommy loves you."

Michael quickly moved his cart around the corner to see what sort of thing was prompting this strange pattern. And he saw them—a mother with a young child who, as all children do, was reaching for something on the grocery store shelf. When his hand reached out toward some enticing object, his mother's voice sounded the alarm, "Mommy doesn't love you." And, once he pulled his hand back in horror, he would get his reward, "Mommy loves you."

I'm horrified by that story—as I know you are—and yet I can't help but wonder if I do the same thing with others who don't act or talk the way I think they should. Oh, I certainly don't put it in such abusive actions or words, but does what my life speaks send the same vacillating message, revealing that perhaps I've made my love for someone else entirely conditioned by a calculated logic of punishment and reward?

If love is nothing but a feeling, it will always be conditional because our feelings get hurt. Love is so much deeper than a feeling. Jesus said that even sinners are good to those who are good to them. Even the sinners are merciful to their friends. If all we do is react to the actions of another, then we've missed the way of life in God's world.

I had a good friend in college who was one of the greatest guys around. He was a good student and played basketball for the university. He was also active in church and took his faith seriously. But he had one difficulty, which he openly admitted. There was a

certain person in our dorm who never would speak to Scott. Scott would pass him in the hall and always say hello, but never once did he receive a response. After several such encounters, Scott got fed up and declared, “That’s the last straw. I’m never speaking to him again.” And he didn’t.

Do you see what sort of a set-up that was? Scott was willing to do the right thing as long as people did the right thing back. When that didn’t happen, Scott reacted by doing nothing. Now, certainly this wasn’t evil by any stretch of the imagination. And I’m not saying that in the grand scheme of things exchanging greetings in the hallway I all that important. The story merely serves to show the tendency we humans have to let the actions of others determine our own actions. And as long as we do that, we’ll have trouble hearing the words that Jesus speaks. As long as we tie our actions to those of others then we are merely reacting to life instead of living it.

We have a saying in our house that goes like this: “Sometimes you have to be bigger than the dog.” We started saying it when Alayne and I were in the courting phase. And she had a dog named Sadie who absolutely adored Alayne. But, she had a strange habit that absolutely drove Alayne bonkers. If she and I were sitting in the room and Alayne called Sadie to come to her, Sadie would jump up and run to me. Now the first time that happened, it wasn’t so bad. But it got old quickly, and Alayne started to get a bit upset. That’s when I reminded her that perhaps this was a time she could be bigger than the dog.

I’ve lost track of how many times she’s called me back to myself with that phrase. I’ve come home upset about some insult I’ve had that day and have tried to vent about the best way to respond. “Sometimes you have to be bigger than the dog,” she says to me.

I come home after spending all day at work and Aaron still only wants his mother and my sentences get shorter and snippier. “Sometimes you have to be bigger than the dog,” she says.

What she’s doing with those words is calling me back to my true self—my better self—that wants to act out the values of the kingdom and not just mirror back what I’m getting.

Now, I can hear what you’re saying. “But what about someone who’s been the biggest dog in the world. The one who stole my innocence. Or my fortune. Or my sister’s life. Are you saying—and is Jesus saying—that we are to just love them as if they’re innocent—as if the hurtful, destructive, mean, terrible, tragic things they’ve done never happened?”

So let me be clear: To condone destructive or abusive behavior is not what Jesus is talking about. This isn’t a call to let everything go and just take what the world or your neighbor or your employer or your spouse dishes out. There are times you will need to remove yourself from a destructive relationship. But that said, there are ways to do that in ways that honor the deepest values you hold and that are not simply reactions in kind.

This much is certain: when the Golden Rule hits the real world, it’s always going to be difficult. As long as there are people around, someone’s going to take advantage of you and make you look silly when you live in a different way.

So why chance it? Because that’s our calling as God’s people who follow in the way of Jesus. We are only asked to live in this seemingly strange way because that the

way God acts toward us. Christian behavior and attitude are prompted by the God we worship—the God who does not hate in response to hatred or love in response to love. God does not react; God acts in love and grace toward all, and such is the way of those who are baptized in his name.

In just a moment, Anna will be immersed into the depths of this story as well. And as Matt and Kelly—along with their extended family and all of us who make promises this day—nurture her in the faith, one of the things she will learn is how vastly different—how upside down—the world is through Jesus' eyes.

And she will need us to remind her that these radical actions Jesus calls us to undertake are based in the ways that God has treated us. We can remind her that she can act out of her true identity as God's beloved child, which may mean that one day she's going to have to be bigger than whatever dog has done her wrong.