

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 6:27-38

Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42

February 20, 2022

The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

I Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

To open my sermon this morning, I want to offer you a phrase to consider...

God is Love, not payback.

I read these words in a poem this week and it highlighted for me something that seems to be a bigger pandemic than COVID right now. That is our struggle to be kind and considerate in the face of conflict, to build bridges and mend divides when it takes a degree of vulnerability, to simply love when love is needed. It's a pandemic of looking at love as a transactional, zero-sum endeavor. And, it might be one of our greatest diseases in a very long time.

And, so the words, *God is Love, not payback*, ring in my ears and bring home an important truth for us at this particular moment in time. (We will talk more about that in a minute).

Let me give you another phrase for consideration...

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

The Golden Rule. Maybe you all know those words. They probably feel more relatable than the first phrase. We've heard the Golden Rule since childhood. In fact, almost every single religious tradition that I have studied has this rule in one form or another at its core. It is a common denominator in the way we are taught to apply our religious beliefs. Be good. Do the right thing. If you want others to treat you well, then be willing to treat others well. Love your neighbor as yourself. We know these lessons backwards and forwards.

But...I want to suggest to you that there is a philosophical flaw in the Golden Rule. A flaw that has been sharply exposed due to our pandemic of transactional goodwill. It's a deficiency that our Gospel reading is trying to diagnose. Because, no matter how much we talk about love, it will never make a difference if we hold within our hearts disregard for one another.

In other words, the Golden Rule doesn't work if you don't care how others treat you. It falls short if you have already dismissed them, ignored them, talked bad about them or decided in your heart that they have no inherent value to who you are and how you want to live. And yet, how often have we all been deficient in our goodwill? In our care for our community? In our regard for one another?

Here are the words from Luke:

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who

takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Do to others as you would have them do to you. That’s the Golden Rule.

Here’s the catch...when you hear these words, the Golden Rule will fall flat if you have already shut out any relationship with those who hate you or hurt you. If you don’t have to see them or talk to them, it’s hard to feel responsibility for them. Out of sight, out of mind. It’s what we might consider cancel culture today. You can block them, ignore them, unfriend them, and ghost them. And then, you have dismissed your responsibility to do good for that person. That’s the flaw of the Golden Rule.

And, here’s the deeper truth about our application of this seminal text, as New Testament scholar Sarah Henrich states, “The golden rule is insufficient for those in covenant relationship with God. One’s own wishes for oneself are no measure for one’s treatment of others. Rather, God’s mercy is to be the measure for God’s people’s behavior.... for disciples, for God’s people, loving, lending, and doing good are all about generosity that does not draw boundaries based on the recipients’ responses. It is good to keep in mind that love in this passage is about willing the good for another and acting on that will.”

Willing good for others because of our basic generosity, not because of the recipients’ responses. God is love, not payback.

But...haven’t we all pointed fingers...they did this to me or they did that to me. They will take advantage of my kindness. They will abuse my goodwill. Well...they might.

But...they might disrespect me or talk bad about me. They might do some things I really dislike. They may waste the good I do for them. And, yes...they might.

As our text goes on to say...

³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.”

If you spend your time rationalizing all the ways someone may do you wrong or take advantage of your kindness, then the Golden Rule will be insufficient for you. So, I want to make sure we take time to consider the rest of our text from Luke to balance our understanding of what is being asked of us.

³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Our text goes on to give us specific examples of where and how we might fall short of such mercy so that we can take a deeper look into our own hearts. It says...Do not judge. Do not condemn. Forgive. Give. Do those things, even when you are afraid to do them. Do those things even when it's inconvenient. Even when it seems that it won't make a difference. Even when you may get absolutely nothing in return.

To be sure, these selfless acts of love aren't condoning the misuse of that love and generosity. It's not a free ticket for others to keep doing wrong things. It's quite the opposite...they are called to the same standard of goodness and goodwill. No one gets a free pass.

What we are doing is showing in real time the power of God's love for us. We are taking the risk to give someone else a glimpse of the goodness of God. We aren't allowing ourselves to be disrespected or abused. We are taking the first step to prove that God believes in unity, peace, reconciliation and justice. We aren't allowing society to guide our ability to be in community. We are following God's example and building a new way to live in community.

Living into these directives is a process and sometimes that process can be arduous. Building new bonds of love and reconciliation when we have been isolated from one another takes patience, hope, and courage to step into a new way of being.

Paul, in our reading from 1 Corinthians, describes this process in terms of growth, of sowing seeds that will take root and grow within our hearts and within our communities. This growth for Paul cannot flourish if the seeds are sown on the values of the world around us...on that transactional love Luke warns about. To flourish it takes the seed and the soil, the sun and the rain. We must participate together. But, it starts with the seed.

Theologian Frank Crouch says that the values of the world we live in, if we don't plant the seeds of goodwill for growth, we are *"dishonorably disconnected from the ways of God and cannot begin to offer the life energy and strength that God abundantly provides."* He goes on to state that Paul acknowledges that we labor within those limitations. *"But we also have available to us a realm of God in which we aren't stuck with those limits. We can become, in Christ, a revelation, a manifestation of God's hidden possibilities, lying within us, waiting to grow into life that death can't end."*

It's the kind of possibility that we need to practice, a hope we have to cultivate, a conviction we must honor. That is our covenant with God. And let it be our covenant with one another. Amen.