

Luke 6:27-38 February 24, 2019 Golden Rule

I don't know how many of you saw the PBS documentary on Mr. Rogers a few weeks back? There was a movie made about him recently also, I believe. I missed actually viewing the original Mr. Rogers show by being born in 1960. The show began in 1968, aimed at a pre-school audience, and the few times at age 8 that I saw the relatively primitive props and puppets on the program, it seemed far below my level of sophistication. And by the time my children came along in the 1990s, there was a huge plethora of children's television programming, and Mr. Rogers got lost in the mix. However, I knew that he was a Presbyterian Pastor whose ministry had primarily taken the form of this television program aimed at the very young. I had also read that his program was essentially an elaboration on the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have others do to you", a verse found within our Gospel lesson this very day. So, I watched the PBS documentary to learn more about him and the program, and one of my take aways was that Mr. Rogers was utterly sincere and earnest, almost innocent or naive, lacking the usual armor of cynicism that many celebrities put on. I also noticed that his program made no accommodation at all fit in to a noisy, action packed world; he and his program were essentially so gentle, respectful, thoughtful, and slow paced that I find it hard to imagine the program being the success today that it was back then. The snippets that were aired during this special were indeed promoting the values of the Golden Rule, of treating others with the respect and kindness you would like to experience in turn. And of course, the whole emphasis of the theme song—"It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, won't you be my neighbor?" -- was one of making neighbors out of strangers, friends out of enemies, even. And his show pushed some boundaries on that theme. For example, one episode that was controversial in its day was when Mr. Rogers was

sitting with his feet in a kiddie pool on a hot afternoon and invited the African American man who played the police officer on the show to sit down and cool his feet down in the same pool. Mr. Rogers went so far as to dry off Officer Clemen's feet afterwards, a pretty clear echo Christ drying the feet of his disciples after washing them. The fact that this seemed controversial then ,and now may seem rather trivial, is indicative of changing times, and a reminder that at least some of those changes are for the better. At the time, it was a brave, Gospel inspired idea. But the primary sense I got from Mr. Rogers and that program was how counter cultural they were, how out of step with the fast paced, aggressive, in your face, competitive model of programming that is everywhere today. Mr. Rogers Neighborhood just doesn't seem to fit in with 21st . America. It's the exact same feeling I get when I read our Gospel lesson this morning, including that Golden Rule that Mr. Rogers upheld. Reading these words of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke presents us with a lifestyle model that is dramatically out of step with the world around us and may seem, like Mr. Rogers, to be sincere, earnest, and possibly innocent or naïve; completely at odds with the values we see popularized in entertainment and politics today. The values these words of Christ present us just don't seem to fit in with 21st C. America.

We know that will be the case as soon as we read the first verse of today's lesson, "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Oh my. I honestly feel that our cultural mantra is much more something like—"if you push me, I'll push you back harder." Or maybe something like, "You don't want me for an enemy, I'll make you pay." A far cry from "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" and the Golden Rule.

Let's think on enemies for a while, shall we? Let me just point out that for the 1st C. Jews to whom Jesus first spoke these words, the world was full of enemies, and those enemies were up close and in your face. Palestine was an occupied country, by the Romans, and there were governing Roman officials and Roman soldiers to keep order, and members of their Roman households, everywhere, just like in any occupation by a foreign power. The Romans were their enemies, and they weren't far away across the world, they were right there in the street with you, often imposing on you to undertake labor or pay taxes that were repugnant to you. We may be experiencing our era as being contentious and hostile, but the Jews of Jesus' day lived far more intensely with daily confrontations with "the enemy" than most of us ever have. It is to *them* that Jesus speaks these oh-so-challenging words about forgoing retaliation against an enemy, but actually finding a way to love their enemy. So if His words seem counter cultural to us, they were that much harder to hear for his contemporaries.

One of the ways in which these words challenged them and us is they ask of us to exchange what we might call an economy of fairness for an economy of mercy. An economy of fairness is the basic human model. You do this for me, and I'll do this for you. You help me, I'll repay you. That's fair. But you mistreat me in this way, and I'll mistreat you in return. A tit for a tat; an eye for an eye. That's also fair. It seems to me that from early childhood on, we all want life and the world to be fair-- in every game we play, every test we take, every job for which we interview, every relationship we attempt. We demand and expect fairness. The irony is that we want this, even though one of the first and hardest lessons we learn and continue to learn is that life and the world simply aren't fair.

Jesus' teaching, though, asks more of us than even to just play fairly, which as we know, is not so easily achieved as it is. Jesus asks us to go *beyond* fairness to mercy. He asks us to forego protecting our rights and our fair share in order to extend compassion, kindness, and mercy, even to the undeserving. Just like God does, in fact! If you do this, Jesus says, "you will be the children of the Most High; for God is kind of the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." There is nothing low about the bar Christ sets for us here; this is a counter cultural lifestyle that is unlikely to advance us by worldly standards and may even leave us looking hopelessly naïve and feeling vulnerable. An economy of mercy is a huge stretch for any of us! And yet, do we really wish Jesus had set the bar lower? Do we really wish he had urged us to live by the world's standards, to take an eye for an eye, even if that eventually leaves the whole world blind, as Ghandi famously observed? Do we wish that he asked of us to be bean counters, measuring out only what we receive, giving back only precisely what others deserve, and living by a book of rules rather than a law of love? And equally importantly, would we want God to apply that same standard of fairness rather than mercy, to us? Yes, these are hard words to hear and even harder words to live by, but if Jesus had said differently, what hope would there be for anyone?

Furthermore, these words, challenging and out of step though they are, are not without grace, without good news for those who seek to follow them. Because the economy of grace, while not based on tit for tat or an eye for eye like the economy of fairness, nevertheless brings back a return. Listen: "Judge not, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven." In other words, the more we are able to immerse ourselves in the mercy and forgiveness of God, and the more we are able to extend such

mercy and forgiveness outward, the deeper is our own experience and reception of that same mercy and forgiveness of God. It's kind of a circular, karma like concept, as we see when Jesus continues, "Give and it will be given to you." What we give comes back to us. Maybe not right away, but somehow, somewhere, someday, sometime. That can sound like a threat, admittedly, if we have given meagerly or maliciously. But it can sound like a promise if we have, within the scope of our human limitations, sought to live with mercy and forgiveness towards others.

Jesus adds a remarkable and compelling image to demonstrate the return we receive on our investment in living mercifully, in following the golden rule. He says, "You will be given a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, put into your lap." What kind of image is this? It could be grain or flour of some kind perhaps? Think of measuring out a cup of flour, for example. If you just take a careless scoop, there may be air pockets within that make it appear to be a fuller measure than it actually is. If you take the scoop, shake it or tap it with a knife, level it off with the knife, maybe even press it down a little with your hand, then you have a truly full measure of flour or whatever it is you are measuring. That's the kind of measure we will receive in return; not a careless or slightly shy measure, but a true, full measure, even so much that it runs over the measuring unit. That God incarnate chooses to use a humble, household kind of image for the economy of mercy warms my heart. And I was also delighted to think about the phrase "put into your lap". Why our lap? Why is the measure not put into our hands or our basket, but our lap? Is it because it's so unexpectedly generous so that it's more of a lapful than a handful? And what is often in many people's laps? Isn't it their children or grandchildren? Or pet? Or project? Something or someone quite often beloved? And wouldn't it be a fine thing to see those lapfuls just mentioned as one of the ways we are, in fact, blessed to

receive in an economy of mercy? One of the ways we get back the measure we gave out, but more so?

I want to share a little personal story of the measures we receive in return within an economy of grace. This past Sunday afternoon, several of us went to the Basset Community Church up in Brimson where Pastor John Reppe served for so many years, in order to be a part of the commissioning of Isabelle Westman as their new lay pastor. Belle is a bright, lovely woman in her mid 40s who has always wanted to be a preacher and pastor, and she will be starting seminary at Luther Seminary this coming fall. I and others of us have gotten to know her as she attends the Tuesday morning lectio divina/dig deeper group here. I was really delighted to attend her commissioning service and somewhat surprised when she told me that my being there meant the world to her. But here's why. Completely unremembered by me, Belle, as an 18 year old, came to see me when I was first pastoring up at Bethlehem in the early 1990s. She had already experienced a call to preaching ministry, but had been discouraged from following this calling because of her gender. She didn't attend Bethlehem, we had never met, but she had heard there was a woman pastor in Two Harbors and came by to meet me and visit briefly. This visit somehow affirmed for her that a woman could indeed have such a calling, and she held onto that affirmation for decades until it has finally come to fruition now. And so my presence at her commissioning was a coming full circle for her, and once she told me about this, it was certainly a lapful of mercy and encouragement to me! Because I had completely forgotten this encounter even happened, and I'm sure I said or did nothing wonderful or profound at that meeting, but God used it in such a way that it mattered greatly to her and helped to bring her, over time, to a new calling of ministry---and I got to find out that I somehow played a part in it! What little

measure I put forward came back to me shaken, pressed, and running over beyond imagining!

That's the economy of mercy. God's mercy.