

## *Living the Golden Rule*

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; Matthew 7:7-14  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
April 23, 2023 – Earth Care Sunday  
The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” These words are commonly known as the Golden Rule. The reason we call it “golden” is because it provides a clear and helpful guideline-for-living that translates into many, many situations. If we expect others to tell us the truth, then we should tell the truth ourselves. If we want others to let us in on the beltway, then we should do the same to others. If we would like others to extend us the benefit of the doubt, then we should not assume the worst about others. “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets,” says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7.

“Living the Golden Rule” is the theme of Interfaith Power and Light’s Earth Care and Faith Climate Action Week this year, in which Lewinsville is again participating. One of the great benefits of participating with Interfaith Power and Light is the resource guide that they provide. This year’s resource guide lists versions of the Golden Rule across the world’s great religions. Judaism gives us Leviticus 19’s “Love your neighbor as yourself.” A Buddhist text says “Make thine own self the measure of others, and abstain from causing hurt to them.” “None of you truly *believes* until he wishes for his brother or sister what he wishes for himself,” the Prophet Muhammad says in the Qur’an. A Hindu text reads, “This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others what you would not have them do unto you.” A Native American saying is that “The first thing we learn is to love each other, and that we should be relative-like to the four-legged ones.” All of these resonate so deeply with Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

As I have been sitting with these words, and the surrounding verses in the Sermon on the Mount from which they come in Matthew 7, as well as our lectionary Psalm for the day, Psalm 116, in the context of Earth Care Sunday, it has become more clear that the Golden Rule is a text of Stewardship and of the profound interconnections that we have with each other.

It remains very true that our care for the earth must necessarily lead us into the realm of public policy, legislation, and the market economy around energy. After all, earth care is fundamentally a *public reality* and a *common good*, because our relationship to the earth is not an individual matter. We all share the earth together, so we need policy conversations about the best short-term and long-term ways to care for the earth in sustainable ways, ways that will enable the air and the water and the soil and the many species of creatures to survive and flourish upon the earth, turning

around from damage that we have inflicted upon the earth. All of those things will involve conversations about policy, and the church has an important voice to bring to those policy discussions.

Fundamentally, however, for the church, earth care is not only a matter of policy. Earth Care is a matter of stewardship; it has to do with our relationship to God. As our meditation verse from Psalm 24 tells us, the earth does not belong to us. It belongs to the Lord. When Psalm 116 asks, "What shall I return to the Lord for all of his bounty to me?", one answer is that we should return the earth to the Lord in a better condition than we found it. That would be a fitting offering for us. We could take steps to amend our ways, change our behavior patterns, address our overconsumption, so that the earth can heal and renew and flourish. In the language of Matthew 7:13, we should not simply walk the broad, easy path of overconsumption and devouring the earth's resources, but the narrow path that leads to life, the path of reducing our consumption, putting limits on our overconsumption.

Our overconsumption and neglect of the earth are ways that we rebel against the holiness of God. In the language of our Brief Statement of Faith, which affirms the language of Romans 3 that all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, "we deserve God's condemnation" for our deep and abiding sinfulness. But God does not leave us in our sinfulness. "God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation." God restores us to paths of righteousness, to the paths of working together, always on the lookout for new partners in the work of stewardship, looking for shared interests that can be built upon, as we find common ground in our efforts to care for the earth. We need not fall into the lazy trap of thinking that we have to choose between a strong economy and a healthy environment. One of our core convictions can be that "All communities have the right to a clean environment. It is possible to have a healthy economy and a healthy environment where all workers and community residents thrive."<sup>1</sup> God is calling us to work together to move in that direction.

As I was reflecting on Interfaith Power and Light's theme for this year of "Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you," I realized that whenever I have thought about the Golden Rule, I have always interpreted it in terms of human relationships. I have taken this text as telling us how to treat *other humans*. But now, I am beginning to see that, while human-human interactions are essential to the Golden Rule, they do not exhaust the meaning of this text. In our deeply interconnected time, when the health and well-being of the planet is being stressed, when environmental degradation is taking place, when soil erosion is ongoing, when carbon emissions and air pollution and poor water quality are all taking place, we need a renewal of our imaginations to see the ways that we should do unto the earth, do unto the air, do unto the soil, we should treat the rest of creation with the kindness and gentleness that we

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<sup>1</sup> Just Transition Alliance, per Interfaith Power and Light resource guide, "Living the Golden Rule."

would want done unto us. We need to enlarge our understanding of who the “others” are to whom we are doing things.

It is not only the Golden Rule from our faith that teaches us this; the Lord’s Prayer does as well. In his book, *The Deeper Journey*, Robert Mulholland writes about how we need to enlarge the circle of those with whom we pray. He says that one of the most direct ways that Jesus helps us to do this is with the opening words of the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father in heaven.” “These four words,” Mulholland writes, “prayed with integrity, structure a whole new mode of being in the world.” The very “first word, our, indicates that when I initiate openness to God in prayer, I don’t do it alone. I come to God within the matrix of all the relationships of my life, actual and potential.”<sup>2</sup> We do not pray “*Our* Father” as individuals. We pray “*Our* Father” as part of the global community of God’s children, we pray it together, along with countless siblings. Even if we are praying it in a room by ourselves, we are not praying it alone.

Friends, when you pray the Lord’s Prayer, who do you think of as being in your “our,” who is in the circle of your O-U-R?

What we know about ourselves is that we have an incredible capacity to limit the circle of our concern, to shrink our O-U-R to people that are in our tribe. We may limit our O-U-R to our families, or people who think like us, people who vote like us, people who are from our country, people who are part of our religious tradition. More than we would like to admit, we bear an unnerving resemblance to the lawyer in Luke 10 who stood up to test Jesus, and when they talked about loving your *neighbor* as yourself, the lawyer wanted to know, “Who is my neighbor?” He wanted to put a limit around those whom he needed to love. Jesus led the lawyer to expand the circle of his O-U-R.

Our friends at Interfaith Power and Light are leading me to think, however, that if we treat the Golden Rule as only applying to what we do to other humans, that may still be too small an O-U-R. When we pray “*Our* Father,” we may also include animals, and bees, and soil, and sky in our O-U-R, in the knowledge that the creation story of Genesis 1 teaches us that humans are simply the youngest siblings in God’s created family. We were created on day 6, but all of these other things were created in days 1-5.

Earth Care is an act of Stewardship. It is the act of caring for that which has been entrusted to us. We do not care for the earth out of fear, we care for the earth out of a heart of love for these other members of God’s created family. God is their Father, too, their Creator. They, too, are our neighbors, our siblings.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016) 107.

One practice for you might be to adopt one aspect of creation. Adopt trees, or the icebergs, or the soil, or bees, or the soil. And as you pray the Lord's Prayer this week, consciously include that other aspect in your O-U-R. See how it shifts your relationship to the rest of creation.

The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it. Let us do unto the rest of the earth, as we would have it do unto us. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.

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