

St. Luke's UMC
October 6, 2024
World Communion Sunday

Do Unto Others Campaign
Getting Under Each Others' Skin
Matthew 7:12; 5:7

It was an interesting Sunday of worship at the St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic parish in St. Cloud, Fl on May 19. Father Fidel Rodriguez refused to serve communion to a woman who was attending her niece's first communion. She was there with another woman who confirmed that they are a couple. According to Father Rodriguez that was not the reason he refused her. It was because she "did not appear to understand the guidelines for proper reception of the sacraments." Not exactly sure how that was determined at the altar rail, but he offered her a blessing and recommended she go to confession.

So the woman, not giving up, returned for the 12:00 mass. The same priest was administering the sacrament. She came up and he asked if she'd been to confession. She refused to answer so he refused to offer her the host in the form of a wafer. So she grabbed it anyway. Believing this to be a desecration of the sacrament and having his hands full at the moment, the priest did what he must have felt was his only recourse and he leaned over and bit her arm. Folks, you can't make up stuff like this.

The Catholic Diocese said that livestream footage of the service confirmed the event but the audio exchange between the priest and the woman prior to the bite cannot be heard due to the choir. How's that for a start to the sermon on World Communion Sunday? We are biting each other all over the world and even in church.

We begin today a series for the month of October that is part of a larger campaign in the United Methodist Church started several years ago by Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City. It's called the Kindness Campaign. Every 2 years Adam Hamilton felt that his congregation needed to counteract the hostility and vitriol of our national election seasons by focusing on basic Christian values like kindness, respect and compassion. In a zoom conversation among pastors about four years ago I encouraged Adam to make this available to other churches so that we can turn this into a United Methodist effort throughout the country. The focus for this year is Do Unto Others.

That of course is what we popularly call The Golden Rule taken from Matthew 7:12 where Jesus said, **"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."** This idea is not exclusive to Jesus. Versions of it appear in ancient Egyptian and Indian texts. Ancient Greek Philosophers share the same thought. We see it in:

--Judaism: **Love your neighbor as yourself.**

--Islam: In the ancient writing called the *Hadith*, second only to the Q'uran, it says, **"As you would have people do to you, do to them."**

--The writings of the Baha'i Faith say: **"Choose thou for thy neighbor that which thou chooseth for thyself."**

--Hinduism: **Treat others as you treat yourself.**
--Buddhism teaches to **Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.**

And on and on we could go—Jainism, Sikhism, ancient Chinese and African religions. The Golden Rule is not unique to Christianity. It is a worldwide hope. Jesus shares the Golden Rule because it's a universal rule. Treating others the way we want to be treated is a source of hope.

So we are going to spend the month of October thinking about what it means to live by the Golden Rule in a time when division threatens our welfare. We begin today considering an idea that seems to be at the heart of the Golden Rule: understanding each other.

Now on the surface the Golden Rule can actually be a little selfish. Do to others as you would have them do to you. Think about it for a moment. If you are an extreme introvert you might want to be left alone in a time of sorrow. So when your friend is going through a crisis you might think you're doing them a favor by giving them space, because that is what you want others to do unto you, when in fact what they need is someone to be with them. How many of you have ever given a gift to somebody because it is the kind of gift you would like to receive, only to have your feelings hurt when that person doesn't love what you gave them?

What is a totally different thought is to ask, "What does that person like? What does that person need to feel supported?" That is a question that requires a wildly different focus. You have to pay attention to people to know that answer. You have to learn from others. In short, you have to work at understanding them.

In his recent book *How to Know a Person*, New York Times columnist David Brooks captures well the challenges of our world today:

Picture of David Brooks with the quote:

"We live in an environment in which political animosities, technological dehumanization, and social breakdown undermine connection, strain friendships, erase intimacy, and foster distrust. We're living in the middle of some sort of vast emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis. It is as if people across society have lost the ability to see and understand one another, thus producing a culture that can be brutalizing and isolating...our problem I believe is fundamentally moral. As a society we have failed to teach the skills and cultivate the inclination to treat each other with kindness, generosity, and respect." (p.97, 104)

Without the social learning to understand each other its no wonder our society frays into intolerance, retribution, and demonizing of people we disagree with. Without a focus on virtues like the Golden Rule and an understanding of the work it requires, we will fall

prey to biting each other even in church. By claiming this ancient virtue, Jesus wasn't just speaking pleasant words, he was offering hard work to be done in order to form a community that shows the world this is how we should treat each other. At the heart of the Golden Rule is a requirement that we practice understanding.

The Golden Rule comes near the end of the Sermon on the Mount. At the other end, the beginning of that sermon, Jesus offered blessings called Beatitudes. One of those beatitudes goes like this: **"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."**(5:7)

The Hebrew word for mercy is *Hesed*, an important word in the Old Testament that describes the character of God. **Hesed means mercy** but not just in a sympathetic way, like feeling sorry for someone going through trouble. As William Barclay says, mercy in this context **"means the ability to get right inside the other person's skin until we can see things with (that person's) eyes, think things with (their) mind, and feel things with (their) feelings."** (Matthew, vol. 1 p103)

In other words, to have the character of God, the character Jesus wants to build in us, we have to be able to get under each others' skin.

Turn to the person beside you and ask, "Do you have the ability to get under people's skin?"

In a sense we all do. We can do things that get under our skin alright. We know how to agitate others like a rash. We know how to get under their skin. Sometimes we even take delight in it. We know how to push people's buttons and get them irritated. But what good does that really produce? Do we feel better about ourselves because we can irritate others?

Instead Jesus says if you want to help someone practice mercy. Really try getting under their skin. See life from their perspective, because when you do, you don't want to irritate any more. You begin to wonder how you would want to be treated in that person's skin. And that is a gamechanger.

I know I've told this story to you more than once, but it's a good one. Claude Evans was chaplain of Southern Methodist University from 1957 until his retirement in 1982. During a good bit of his tenure there Willis Tate was president of the university and they were good friends even though they were quite different men. Claude was highly relational and loved hanging out with students. He wasn't much a rule follower. Willis Tate on the other hand was an administrator whose job was to make sure the rules of the university were followed. He had to raise the funds that kept people like Claude in a job. But despite the differences the two men enjoyed a great friendship...until one Advent.

Claude got the idea to have an Advent dance at chapel service. He was always looking for creative ways to keep students interested and engaged. This was also a time when "hot-pants" were in fashion for women. At one point in this service Claude was dancing on the chancel with an 18 year old girl in hot pants.

The Dallas Morning News had been called to cover the story so they sent a reporter. After all, what better way to attract students to SMU, right? Well, the story got covered all right. Small town newspapers that didn't even cover World War II covered this story. And the president's office got flooded with phone calls from angry United Methodists all over the country asking what they're doing down at SMU. Willis Tate called Claude to his office, and they got into a bitter dispute and it severed the friendship.

Some time later, Claude took a retreat where the leader used Gestalt therapy. One exercise they did was called the double chair exercise. You put two chairs facing each other and pretend that someone you are angry with is sitting across from you and you talk with them. Claude volunteered.

He sat down and began giving Willis Tate a piece of his mind. He explained how wounded he was by his friend's lack of understanding and support. When he finally got quiet and it was clear he had nothing else to say, the director said, "Now, I want you to change chairs. And this time I want you to pretend you are Willis Tate and respond to yourself. So he did.

He sat in the other chair and was quiet for the longest time. Finally he said, "Now Claude, you know I love those kids as much as you do. I love SMU, but Claude sometimes you get a little carried away. You do things because I know you love those kids, but you might consider all the implications."

It is said that when Claude returned home to Dallas, soon after a friendship was restored.

"Blessed are those who get under your skin, for you will get under their skin." "In everything," says Jesus. Not just sometimes. Not just when we believe our efforts will lead to a good outcome. But even when people are getting under our skin, "In everything, do unto others as you would have them do unto you."