

Do Unto Others Week 1: The Golden Rule

Matthew 7:12, Matthew 5:7 (NRSV)

We are kicking off a brand new 4 week series today called “Do Unto Others.” And St. Luke’s, along with UMCs all over the country are doing this series as a lead up to the election.

And I don’t know how you were raised, but one of the things I OFTEN heard around my house was that you don’t talk about two things. What were they?

RELIGION and POLITICS.

Well friends, we’re talking about both! For a whole month. Let’s go!

And I know, on the surface, this feels like the set up to the worst holiday dinner table setting ever. You might see this series framed and think, “what is going to happen? Is this going be super uncomfortable? What if Pastor Mindie says something I really disagree with?”

You know what? That could happen. There might be moments over the next few weeks where we DO hit on something that is uncomfortable. We all might feel challenged in various ways. You might very well disagree with me at some point! Here’s what I want you to know: we can have these kinds of conversations in this community. In fact, I would tell you that our community is better WHEN we

have these conversations. I would say that our faith grows when we have these kinds of conversations.

And, as people of faith, our greatest task...the most important thing we can do...is have our lives reflect who Jesus is. That's true at any point, in any season, and I think it is especially critical during an election season. I think it is especially critical when we find ourselves in moments that ARE tense, that ARE divisive. And when we find ourselves in these moments, it is critical that we come back to this question:

(SLIDE) What is Jesus like and how does that impact how we live?

That question will stay in front of us the whole month, and today we're going to be looking at it from the lens of two verses of Scripture that you heard read today. We're looking at a couple of Jesus' teachings during what we now call The Sermon on the Mount. And what Jesus does here is really lays out what it looks like to follow him, to live like the example that he gives us. If you're ever wondering how Jesus would respond to something, if you're staring down at your WWJD bracelet having deep thoughts about what to do...read through Matthew 5-7. Because you'll see what Jesus hopes for us here. Now, the warning is, NONE of it is easy and very little of it is probably our natural response to

most things. If you read through the whole sermon, you will likely find yourself, more than once, thinking that these things Jesus says actually go against the grain of what we would assume we are supposed to do in order to navigate the world and have a good life.

So, what we're talking about today, what we're framing this whole 4 week conversation around, it's not necessarily easy. It's not always intuitive. But it is incredibly useful. And it does help us have a framework for how to respond, especially in difficult situations.

Near the beginning of the sermon, Jesus starts by listing these things we call "beatitudes". These were conditional, ethical ways of living that said, "if you do these things...then you will be blessed." You will be closer to God. You will be living a life that not only feels holy but actually makes a difference in the world.

And so he goes through and names all these different things. It follows this pattern: blessed are the (blank) because they will (blank). So you can kind of see this relationship, over and over. Do this thing, live this way, have this posture toward the world and the people in your life, and here's what you're going to experience as a result.

And the one we're really focusing in on here today is this one. Where Jesus says this: **(SLIDE)**

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy
(Matthew 5:7)

Now, mercy here is very simply understood as acts of benevolence, forgiveness, kindness. And I highly doubt any of us hear this and think, “nah, that’s for me.” Right? This sounds ideal and like what we would want to do—it just gets complicated when we take it beyond this little section of scripture and try to put it into our real lives. It gets complicated when the news cycle tells us a very different story. It gets complicated when that colleague or family member says something that hits every single button and we want to come back swinging, and very much NOT with acts of benevolence, forgiveness, and kindness.

How do we respond like Jesus tells us to when we are angry and our emotions are all over the place? How do we come back to this idea of showing mercy and kindness when our hearts are racing and the room is spinning and it’s hard to keep our voices from shaking? How do we take this thing that Jesus says is actually really important and apply it to these highly divisive interpersonal moments that I think an awful lot of us are experiencing in this season?

First of all, I think we have to remember that Jesus, while he may have said these words in what feels like this very idyllic setting, Jesus lived in the real world. **(SLIDE) Jesus lived in a politically divided world.**

There was this constant, underlying tension between the Jews and Romans because the Romans were there, in Jerusalem, as the occupying force. They were in charge of a place that wasn't originally theirs and, spoiler, people did not love that! So there's this simmering tension of who is actually in charge, what rules are we living by, how do we maintain our very important ethnic and religious identity but still submit to the government that is very powerful and isn't going anywhere anytime soon?

So there's that bigger landscape, but there's also these really micro-internal politics that are happening. And they're happening between all these different religious groups. I mean, would you believe that there were multiple ways to interpret Scripture and live out what you think it says? So even in Jesus' time, this is happening!

I just want you to know this because Jesus didn't call us to a type of relating, a type of living, that was happening inside a conflict-free bubble. Now, they didn't have a 24 hour news cycle. They didn't have tweets. They didn't have the exact same climate we're living in. But they DID have challenges. They DID have disagreements. And they DID have very real consequences that happened from the difference of values and opinions that were being lived out as social policies.

And Jesus, as he lived in this reality, he was engaged. He was bold. He called people out, he flipped over tables, he deeply challenged people to examine if how they were living really...no, REALLY...reflected who God was.

And here's what is so, so important. Here's the thing that I fear we miss more than we get it right. Here's the thing that Jesus did that I believe if we could do this just like 5% more in our daily lives...would actually change the climate of our country and these political tensions we find ourselves in.

(SLIDE) Jesus deeply engaged and he never lost sight of the humanity in front of him.

He would have difficult conversations AND he would share a meal. He would get angry AND he would go to the synagogue to have proximity with some of the people who made him the angriest. He would weep over an entire city AND he would selflessly love and forgive the people who treated him like a criminal and even put him to death.

Jesus' love for people was so deep. His action in the face of injustice was so bold. And I think, at the end of the day, the example that he gives us, it all comes back to this other statement of Jesus that we heard today:

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

I told you this isn't easy. But can you imagine what it would look like if we really, authentically lived this out in a way that reflected the example of Jesus? In a way that embodied Jesus' heart for people? In a way that drew us toward understanding—not agreeing, necessarily—but wanting to understand and value the lived experiences of the people in our lives so that we can treat them the way that we would want to be treated.

Can you imagine how that would instantly shift what is happening in our world?

David Brooks has a new book **(SLIDE)** called “How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen.” And in it, he says this:

“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)

We're going to unpack a lot of this together over the next few weeks. But I think what I would add here is that in many ways, we've lost the ability to live like Jesus. We're missing the example that he gave us on how to treat each other. Because what Jesus did is he helped people find the points of our shared humanity: healing, feeding, experiencing forgiveness, grace, belonging. Those things transcend how we vote, they transcend our opinions or affiliations. They're the things that connect us and that as followers of Jesus, we have a responsibility to care about and cultivate in our world.

Our experiences can be very different. We can disagree in absolutely profound ways. We—even if we think we're right most of the time—we can mess up and hurt others...and in the same way, we can find ourselves on the other side of that, hurt and wondering how to make sense of what we're seeing and hearing.

Again...it's all really complicated. It's all a challenge to live out. And as hard as it is, I do believe that when Jesus invites us into these ways of living and treating each other, that he does it because he knows that his grace and the work of the Holy Spirit goes with us. This isn't something that we need to just muster up enough patience or kindness on our own and hope for the best. Being able to engage with people in a way

that shows mercy, that treats others the way we would want to be treated, even in the face of deep, important difference and conflict...that's spiritual work. That's what we call discipleship. That's a commitment to live more like Jesus.

And maybe, seeing that it's a Communion Sunday and World Communion Sunday specifically, maybe the Communion Table is a good place for us to do some of this work. Maybe it's where we start, maybe it's where we refuel and reconnect, but no matter where we are, the Communion Table is this incredible, equalizing space for every single person.

One of my very favorite books is called **(SLIDE)** "Accidental Saints" by Nadia Bolz-Weber, where she writes about the church she used to pastor in Denver. In one of the chapters she talks about communion and the experience one of her church members had while both serving and receiving communion. Here's what she says:

"Jeff is given a place where he is told by others that he is a child of God. He is given a place where he can look other people in the eye, other annoying, inconsistent, arrogant people, in the eye, hand them bread, and say, "Child of God, the body of Christ, given for you," and then he, in his own arrogant inconsistencies, has a frame of

grace through which to see even the people he cannot stand.

And this is it. This is the life we get here on earth. We get to give away what we receive. We get to believe in each other. We get to forgive and be forgiven. We get to love imperfectly. And we never know what effect it will have for years to come. And all of it...all of it is completely worth it.”--Nadia Bolz-Weber, Accidental Saints

We are connected. We are forgiven. We are all people in need of mercy, in need to be treated the way that we hope others would want treated themselves. And when we come to this table, we are all people who are capable of receiving grace. Grace that we didn't earn, grace that we didn't have to work hard enough to attain. Just...Grace. That God gives. Because that's who God is. And it is who God invites us to be.

Transition to communion.