

Epiphany 7, Year C
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Some of the teachings of Jesus move us, comfort us, motivate us, or challenge us. These often quoted sayings are the ones that find their way into popular consciousness, resonate with our desire to grow toward being our better selves, and beckon us to turn toward the light like a flower to the sun. Today we hear one of those aspirational teachings of Jesus in the Gospel according to Luke: **“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”** Also known as The Golden Rule, this pithy saying is one of the most widely affirmed ethical teachings known to humanity, with versions of it appearing in the Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Confucian, and Zoroastrian traditions thousands of years before Jesus lived among us. The computer mouse pad in my office includes this quote as a replica of a Norman Rockwell painting filled with people from religions and cultures around the world.

As much as we might embrace and affirm Jesus’ teaching of the Golden Rule, seldom will we find his examples of how to live this wisdom needlepointed on pillows, printed on a mug, or framed as written in beautiful calligraphy: **“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who**

abuse you.” Those are some hard words to hear, much less to live by. Yet Jesus was one of the rare souls who lived what he taught. Jesus chose to change the way one might normally respond to the bad behavior of others. As God Incarnate he literally embodied the way we are to treat one another. Jesus teaches us that **“the Most High ... is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”**

To be clear, nowhere in this Bible reading does Jesus excuse or justify the behavior of those who hate, curse, or abuse you. Instead what he does is to shift the focus from someone else’s behavior, which is beyond your control, to ***your response***, which is often the only thing within your control. Austrian neurologist and psychologist Viktor Frankl survived imprisonment in four Nazi concentration camps. After he was released from Auschwitz he said the only thing he was left with was, **“the last of the human freedoms, to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”** Feeling pain, anger, hatred, and depression might be appropriate responses to the traumatic suffering intentionally inflicted by something like a concentration camp. But one can feel any of these things and still choose how to act. We can choose to take a step, even if it is a small one,

toward light and love, rather than remaining stuck in an ongoing cycle of destructive behavior. To love our enemies is to treat them as Jesus would, not to like them, or to accept their negative behavior, or to allow them to abuse others. It is to knowingly choose to **“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”**

Imagine if we were all forever limited by our worst behavior, our most shameful moments, our nastiest and cruelest acts. Take a moment and think about yours. If we were never forgiven, never allowed to learn from our mistakes, to grow beyond our basest instincts, to apologize and try again, how warped and stunted would we all be? And if we had to drag around with us, like an enormous duffel bag or two, all the awful things anyone else has ever done to us, how exhausting and limiting would that be? What Jesus does, both in these words and with his life and death, is to show us that there is another way, one that begins with how we choose to respond when other people treat us badly. We can—and sometimes should—address the behavior; but our response to others should be determined by us, and not them.

Being human, we need some help to be able to do this. We need the Presence of God, the love of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can be people who embody God’s love in the world. We may

also need extra love, prayer, support, therapy, spiritual direction, or any number conversations with other followers of Jesus along the way in order to choose to do to others as we would have them do to us. The way of God is the way of love, and we are encouraged to get all the help we need from God and one another as we learn to choose love, especially under difficult circumstances. For us to be created in the image of God and to be baptized as children of God means that we are continually called to share the love of God. It is a learning process. We will not always get it right, so we will need to practice admitting mistakes, apologizing for wrongs, and asking for forgiveness.

Fortunately there is mercy, and we can learn, and grow, and by the grace of God be transformed as faithful followers of Jesus. It is a challenge, one we are called undertake together as the people of God, and with the help of God. Given that truth, I take comfort in the insightful words of Maya Angelou: **“You did the best that you knew how. Now that you know better, you’ll do better.”**

Amen