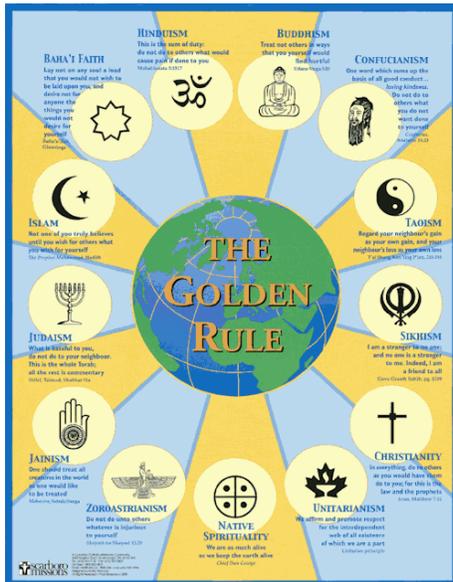


“Tough Love”

February 24, 2019
Luke 6: 27-38

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Wall Street United Church

The passage we read today contains the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*



The Golden Rule exists in some form in almost every Religion. You often see posters like the one to the left in schools or other places. It's a teaching we can all agree on and live by. It sounds nice.

Even children's books touch on the subject. It's something we'd all like our children to learn. The Golden Rule is basic, it's lovely, it's something no one is going to argue about.

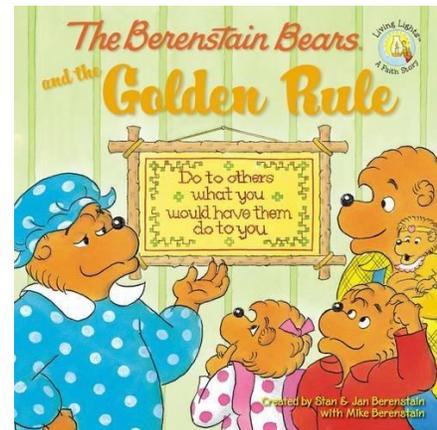
But for Christians, what we call the Golden Rule comes as one part of Jesus'

teaching on the plain. (It's similar to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, but in Luke he is on a plain ... not a plane!) This particular teaching comes at the end of the paragraph that goes like this:

“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

This teaching is not lovely — it's not something we tend to see in children's books. This teaching is hard, bordering on impossible. It goes on about not judging others, forgiving others and giving without expecting anything in return. Those teachings are a little easier for us to stomach, but they are still hard to live by.

Loving everyone is good and nice as an idea, but in real life it is a whole different ball game.



It is natural that we are different and think differently. There is nothing wrong with that. We look different; we have different tastes in foods and different interests in activities and different opinions on all sorts of things. The goal of life, even for Christians, is *not* for us to be the same. Diversity is God's idea and it is wonderful. Those differences lead to wonderful conversations and of course some friction and conflict too.

My husband likes to be a manure disturber at dinner parties. Actually, it's pretty funny to watch. His favourite is when our parents get together for dinner. It's not often that we have dinner with his parents and my parents together — maybe once a year or once every two years. But every time we do, part way through the dinner Alex will drop an unsuspecting bomb in the middle and sit back and enjoy the entertainment. The unsuspecting bomb comes in the form of him saying something like:

“So how about the monarchy?” or “I hear Harry and Megan are having their baby soon” — something like that. Now we've been married for almost 24 years, so you'd think our parents would see this coming, but they never do. You see Alex's parents are British and they grew up in depression-era, post-war England within a very rigid class system. In England, as soon as you open your mouth, everyone knows what class you come from. And being from working class Manchester and Liverpool; neither Alex's Mom nor Dad speaks the Queen's English. They grew up resenting the upper class and the monarchy. It's a big reason they emigrated to Canada. My parents, on the other hand, are very fond of the Queen and the monarchy. So as soon as Alex plants the conversation bomb, a civil but heated debate begins, and I'm left trying my best to steer the conversation back to safe ground.

Differences and disagreements are a part of life. Some studies have shown that most of the time they are good for us. (e.g. the January/February edition of *The Atlantic* called “Why are we so angry?”)

However, we live in a time period where those disagreements are becoming more extreme and more polarizing. When you look through history there have always been division and polarization — but one of the things that make today different from other times in history is the internet and social media. It is ironic because though the internet puts us in touch with the world and therefore in theory has the potential to bring us closer together, what it actually does is connect us to more like-minded people than ever before. We end up seeing and hearing from similar voices again and again, especially on Facebook. If you vote a certain way and shop a certain way and think about the world a certain way, you're going to see more and more of 'you' on social media.

That's partly because of us and things we choose to "like" or follow, but it's largely because the algorithms on the internet are designed that way. I heard an interesting interview on CBC radio that YouTube in particular is designed to send you down other intriguing rabbit holes that lead you to more extreme versions of what you like. Hence the growing movement of 'Flat Earther's'. This is slightly humorous when it comes to the Flat Earth society, but not at all humorous when it leads run-of-the-mill disgruntled teenage boys to a White Supremacist group or to being radicalized by a religious or political group.

We are divided in so many ways. Instead of having the opportunity to talk in real life with people who think differently — instead of truly diverse community, social media puts us strongly into *this* camp or *that* camp. Us and them. Then *those* people seem more and more alien and threatening and frightening to us.

One of the problems is that we have fewer real places of community. Churches are such good and important spaces for real community. In this place you get quite a diversity of people. When we were running our kids around to hockey, the parents and the kids were all around the same age and stage as us and shared that common interest in hockey. When kids are in school, they are put together with kids the same age. You come to the Brockville 50 plus Activity Center during the week here at the church and you are interacting with other active seniors.

There are very, very few organizations that are as diverse as the church. Here you have all ages, here you have rich and poor, here you have Liberals and Conservatives and every other political colour on the rainbow. And speaking of rainbows, in this church we have people of different sexual orientations. It could be more intercultural, but then Brockville isn't exactly incredibly diverse. Real community is something society needs more of — and that should be one of our goals as a church. Of course, part of real community is conflict. But studies show (again that January 2019 issue of the Atlantic) that most of the kinds of conflicts and disagreements we end up in when we are interacting face to face are actually beneficial, and make us and our community better and stronger.

Jesus was not saying we shouldn't have disagreements or even have conflict with each other. I mentioned my husband being a manure disturber ... well *Jesus was the original 's..t' disturber*. He was not a 'don't rock the boat/ peace at all cost' guy. He was very critical of the religious leaders who held the power of the day—he called them hypocrites to their face—and his opposition to their ways was what led them to have him arrested and killed. This is important to remember because sometimes Christians

think they have to be nice and agree with people in order to keep the peace, and that is not necessarily what we are called to.

Brené Brown in her book *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, says that we need to have strong backs and soft fronts, but that most of us have the opposite. We tend to be spineless and have weak backs: we are insecure and want people to like us and we are afraid of being different or making any waves. At the same time, we put heavy armour around our front so that we don't get hurt. But when we 'armour up' (that's how Brené puts it) we also can't properly feel love or give love or have compassion for others. She says that when we strengthen our backs so that we dare to live according to our values, according to our faith, even if that goes against what others think ... and when we dare to take our armour down from in front of our hearts, the reward is incredible. It is a difficult road, but it makes a huge difference.

When I think of people who had strong backs and soft fronts I think of Nelson Mandela, I think of Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr., I think of Mahatma Gandhi, ... I think also of Jesus.

As Christians we are called to be different. Being a Christian should change you and it should change your character. We are called to love our enemy. What does that mean? Well, we should never dehumanize another person. You're probably thinking to yourself that you have never dehumanized anyone, and maybe you're right. Have you ever called Donald Trump a monster? What about the teenager in town who is accused of murdering Damian Sobieraj in Hardy Park? I'm always amazed at the things people say in the comment section of a news article or on Facebook. But you argue: that's different — these are really horrible people! We have to separate the actions of people from the person. We are still called to seek justice — that is part of having a strong back. But we are also called to love our enemy. Because our enemy, no matter what they have done or said, just like each one of us, is a child of God. We are called to a new way of living. We are called to choose forgiveness even when it is difficult.



And it is a choice. Every time we are wronged in big or in small ways when someone offends us, we have a choice to make: to be angry and want revenge ... or to choose to forgive. In my experience this is something you have to practice.

You will likely fail a lot at first, but hopefully you will notice and say “Darn, I did it again – I sent that nasty email back,” or “I yelled at that person who insulted me.” But if you seek God’s forgiveness and help for your own failings and if you ask God’s help to be more forgiving, you will start to notice the point where you have a choice to make. Instead of going into auto-pilot and doing the knee-jerk reaction, you can choose between forgiveness and revenge.

Forgiveness does not diminish the hurt and the pain; in fact, it acknowledges it. People with soft hearts love big, but also feel the pain. But forgiveness sets us free to be healed from the hurt and not be imprisoned to the darkness of that pain. Hurt people hurt people, but healed people also heal people.

I titled my sermon “Tough Love” because the love that Jesus calls us to is hard. But it is so worth it! This is a love that can heal your deepest hurts. This is a love that can help you through your times of great struggle. This is a love that can bring light to dark places. This is a love that can change the world.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. Thanks be to God.