

Words to Live By: The Gold Standard for Life
Romans 12:9-18, Matthew 7:12
July 5, 2009

As we celebrate our nation this weekend, I trust you will agree that we live in one of the greatest states in the Union. Although “The Golden State” became California’s official nickname in 1968, it was 120 years prior that gold was discovered here. James Marshall’s discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill launched great visions of a new land where golden dreams could be realized. We could certainly use a gold rush these days!

The naming of something as “golden” marks it as something of excellence and of immeasurable value. In the eighteenth century the scripture verse we heard from Matthew’s gospel became known as the Golden Rule: In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.

The Golden Rule is not unique to Christianity nor is it original to Jesus. All major world religions have one version or another. The Buddhist tradition teaches “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”ⁱ The Muslim version is, “No one is a believer until you desire for another that which you desire for yourself.”ⁱⁱ One version in Judaism is, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.”ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus phrases his version in a positive form: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

The Golden Rule is not intended to be a rule of thumb for getting what we want. For instance, it doesn’t give me permission to buy Mark a sewing machine for his birthday so that I can use it for myself, even if to make something for him!

Nor is it a way for us to think of doing something in order to get something in return. If I bake delicious homemade chocolate chip cookies for my family, maybe they will clean up the mess I make! Wrong!

The focus is on doing for others. We are to take the initiative in doing the loving things. We shouldn’t just respond to the acts of others. Nor is it a simply avoiding doing harm. We are to be proactive in reaching out. It is a matter of anticipating the needs of others before those needs are even expressed. Our actions might begin by asking ourselves, “If I were in those circumstances, what would I want someone to do for me? What kind of support would I need if that were to happen to me?”

On a personal level, the golden rule might look something like this:

- When my opinion or belief is different from yours, I want you to enter into dialogue with me, not to “set me straight,” but to reach some common ground so we can continue to be in relationship.

- When I have injured another through my thoughtless actions or hurtful words, I want you to gently bring it to my attention and join me in finding a way not to repeat the offense.
- When I am in emotional pain, I want you to be there without trying to “fix me” or make it go away.

Following the golden rule is not easy. Treating others as we want to be treated is hard and humbling, demanding of our time and energy. To treat one another with utmost dignity and respect, with honor and unconditional love is the hardest work we are called to do. When we follow it, we find that not only are the lives of others enriched, our own lives are richer as well.

Catastrophes have a way of bringing out the best in people and uniting us around a common cause. I trust that you remember the unity that our nation experienced in the wake of the attacks on 9/11. There was a sense of solidarity even in the midst of our great vulnerability and sorrow. When another human being, someone like me, is in trouble, feelings of compassion naturally arise from within. Jesus challenges us to make that feeling of compassion that “surfaces in emergencies the heartbeat of our everyday consciousness.”^{iv}

There is a children’s story, *Amos and Boris*^v, in which two of God’s creatures find themselves facing crises.

A young mouse named Amos lived by the ocean. He loved the smell of sea air and the sound of the surf. Dreaming about faraway places on the other side of the water, he built a boat on the beach. When the boat was finished, he loaded it with cheese, biscuits, acorns, honey, two barrels of fresh water, a compass, a telescope, a needle and thread for mending torn sails, and various other necessities such as bandages and iodine, a yo-yo and playing cards.

When ready, he pushed his boat out to the ocean at high tide and set sail. The boat was well suited to the sea and Amos the mouse proved to be a natural sailor.

One night he saw some whales spouting water. Lying on the deck of his boat gazing at the immense starry sky, the tiny mouse was so taken by the beauty around him that he rolled over and over and right off the deck of his boat and into the sea.

“Help,” he squeaked as he grabbed for his boat. But the boat went sailing on with the waves and Amos never saw it again. He was stranded in the middle of the huge ocean, a thousand miles from the nearest shore, with no one else in sight, not even a piece of driftwood to hold on to. Amos could do nothing but tread water, but his tiny arms and legs became very tired.

Suddenly a huge head burst through the water in front of him. It was a whale! “What kind of fish are you?” the whale asked.

“I’m not a fish,” said Amos. “I’m a mouse, which is a mammal, the highest form of life. I live on land.”

“Holy clam and cuttlefish!” said the whale. “I’m a mammal myself, though I live in the sea. Call me Boris.”

Amos introduced himself and told Boris how he came to be there in the middle of the ocean.

“I am on my way to the coast of Africa to attend a meeting of whales from the seven seas. You could come with me and then I’ll take you home.”

“I’m afraid I’ve had too much adventure already. I only want to go home.”

“I would not mind changing my plans to take you home first. In fact, I would consider it a privilege. What other whale in all the world ever had the chance to get to know such a strange creature as you! Please climb aboard.” And Amos got on Boris’ back.

“Are you sure you’re a mammal?” Amos asked. “You smell more like a fish.” Boris the whale went swimming along, with Amos the mouse on his back.

Amos was relieved to be safe and secure again. He lay down on the whale to take a nap. Occasionally Boris the whale forgot that he had a passenger and would take a deep dive, throwing Amos off his back and into the water! As they traveled they shared the stories of their lives.

Finally they reached the seashore Amos called home. Boris said, “We will be friends forever, but we can’t be together. You must live on land and I must live at sea. I’ll never forget you, though.”

“And you can be sure I’ll never forget you,” said Amos. “I will always be grateful to you for saving my life. I want you to remember that if you ever need my help I’d be more than glad to give it!” How he could ever possibly help Boris, Amos didn’t know, but he knew how willing he was. Amos dove off Boris’s back and swam to the sand. Boris turned and disappeared deep into the ocean.

Many years later there occurred one of the worst storms of the century, Hurricane Yetta. Boris the whale was flung ashore by a tidal wave and stranded on the shore where Amos lived. When the storm cleared up, Boris was left lying high and dry on the sand, losing his moisture in the hot sun and desperately needing to be back in the water. Amos came down to the beach to see the damage from the hurricane. Of course Boris and Amos recognized each other at once.

“Amos, help me,” said the giant whale to the tiny mouse. “I think I’ll die if I don’t get back in the water soon.” Amos realized he had to do something very fast. Suddenly he was gone, leaving Boris all alone on the shore, where he didn’t belong. Soon Amos came racing back with two of the biggest elephants he could find. The two goodhearted elephants pushed Boris with all their might until he began turning over and rolled toward the ocean. Within minutes Boris was in the water with waves washing over him, life returning to his body once again.

“Good-bye, dear friend,” said Boris.

“Good-bye, dear friend,” said Amos. They knew they might never meet again, but they knew they would never forget one another.

Two most unlikely creatures treated one another as they would like to be treated. That’s the power of the Golden Rule: Do to others as you would have them do to you.

When we are splashed with the waters of baptism, we promise to follow the golden rule. In the tradition of the Middle East, breaking bread at the table is a symbol of solidarity, a pledge of friendship. Today we feast at the table of Jesus Christ, renewing our promise to treat one another as Jesus treats us. That’s the Gold Standard of the Christian life.

ⁱ Udana-Varqu 5:18.

ⁱⁱ Sunnah.

ⁱⁱⁱ Talmud, Shabbat 31A.

^{iv} Robert Corin Morris, *Provocative Grace: The Challenge in Jesus’ Words* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2006), p. 81.

^v William Steig, *Amos & Boris* (New York: Farrar, Staus and Giroux, 1971).

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA