

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
The Gospel and the Ethics of Reciprocity

Thomas F. Heck

Reflections on Ex. 22:20-26; 1 Thes 1:5c-10; Mt 22:34-40 – October 26, 2014

Today's Gospel reading, from Matthew Ch. 22, besides asserting the importance of loving the divine mystery of God with everything we have, raises the love of neighbor up as the indispensable second part of the equation. One might say that these teachings, taken together with the passage from Exodus about how to treat with kindness those *not* of your own tribe or nation, sum up what the Bible has to say about the Golden Rule. In secular circles, they would be classed as statements about the "ethics of reciprocity"—widely accepted as wise moral principles.

The reading from Exodus directs us not to *oppress* the alien, "for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt." Can you hear the reciprocity?

In another place in the Hebrew bible, Leviticus 19, verse 18, it says "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There it is again—that reciprocity, that balance.

It's unfortunate that these are not the only places in the O.T. where reciprocity comes into play. There's an infamous passage in Leviticus 24, based on a narrow reading of the principle of reciprocity in the context of revenge, that says:

If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him. Thus . . . the one who kills a man shall be put to death.

These are just a few of the 613 Sinai regulations that the scholarly Pharisee in Matthew's Gospel must have had in mind when he challenged Jesus to declare which one was greatest. How fortunate that Rabbi Jesus was able to give the right emphasis to the Golden Rule *in the context of love* rather than *revenge*, and to raise it up as coequal to the first commandment.

Anyone who looks into the Ethics of Reciprocity in cultures and lands beyond the bible soon realizes that this inspired formula for righteous living was not revealed early on just to the people of the Book—Jews and Christians. No, my friends: from today's perspective it appears that the Holy Spirit has been working globally, and for quite a few centuries, to *entice* humankind toward the generosity and compassion necessary to recognize and apply this ethical principle "in every land, by every tongue." Its earliest formulation may have been in the teachings of Confucius, which have been dated to about 500 BCE—earlier than when the Pentateuch was compiled, according to most scholars.

Our Gospel account today describes the Golden Rule as a *commandment*. And on that subject, Richard Rohr has some insights worth repeating. He says:

The commandments, you know, are not requirements to get God to love you. That is forever and already taken care of.

Moral mandates are requirements for your *own* self expansion and transfor-

mation, allowing you to begin to *see* in a broad and non-self-referential way. They put up necessary barriers to your natural egocentricity and allow you to encounter and reverence the other precisely as other (and not as me!), and frankly so you can recognize your own stingy spirit. How can you possibly be prepared to know the Ultimate Other, that some of us call God, if you cannot stretch yourself to meet the little every day needs of “others” that are often an irritant, a demand, a stretch?

After reading and absorbing Rohr’s prophetic wisdom, one can be excused for not wishing to complicate the picture with yet another layer of interpretation. But at the risk of sounding foolish, let me hold up for your consideration two other aspects of the Golden Rule mandate that many have overlooked.

First, as mentioned earlier, we should appreciate that it really is *worldly* wisdom, shared by *many* cultures and communities. The *Song of the Golden Rule* lyric, that I wrote in 2010 (see a copy attached), reminds us of this in its annotations. My aim in writing the song was to celebrate this important message and make it musically memorable for kids, especially.

Second, there’s a suggestion in Unitarian Universalist circles that “the Golden Rule doesn’t go quite far enough. Or at least, that it must not be misunderstood in a limited way.” A business leader, Dr. Tony Alessandra, puts it this way: “We need to practice the true intent of the Golden Rule, which is, *do unto others the way they want to be done to.*” Or “treat others the way *they* want or need to be treated.”

Gadzooks! Or as Charlie Brown might say, “Good grief!” Can the age-old wisdom of Jesus and the Bible be trumped by the ethical reflection of a business man of our own time and place?

Think about this for a minute: Wisdom is where we find it! I have a 94-year-old mother-in-law, unchurched but astonishingly wise, with whom I discussed this aspect of reciprocity last week. She suggested that I look at the civil rights movement. In the 1960s, there were many liberal voices calling for true equality for the African-American minority in this country in public services, food, housing, education, transportation, wages, and the vote. The list can go on and on. But how many were willing to go the extra mile? to advocate—not for what seemed fair to us (that all be treated equally), but for what was really needed by them: some kind of compensatory boost.

“They needed affirmative action quotas,” she continued, “and not many otherwise righteous and good white men and women in our society were ready to give *that* level of *preferential* treatment to blacks,” to those who had been historically oppressed, in an effort to make up for past injustices.

So perhaps the lesson we should take from today’s scripture readings is of course to honor the reciprocity and righteousness that is called for. But above and beyond the Golden Rule there is yet another level of love that is only limited by what Norman Cousins called our “moral imagination.” (You may recall that in the 1950s, Cousins played a prominent role in bringing the *Hiroshima Maidens*, a group of twenty-five badly disfigured *Hibakusha*, to the United States for medical treatment.)

It’s quite possible that Jesus knew exactly what Cousins was driving at with his “moral imagination.” Remember how Jesus advocated for taking love of neighbor—taking the Golden Rule—to the next level in the parable of the Good Samaritan? (The story is preserved only in Luke’s Gospel.)

That remarkable Samaritan not only tended the traveler’s wounds, but also “set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day,

when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, ‘Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.’”

In conclusion, it appears that the ethics of reciprocity—the Golden Rule—is excellent

as a moral principle. But it might not be the last word when it comes to how well we love our neighbor.

What do you think?

A Musical Reflection on “The Second Greatest Commandment”

The homilist’s *Song of the Golden Rule* is available on YouTube in two versions: [for grown-ups](#), and [for kids](#). The grown-up lyrics are below, with footnotes. Enjoy!

Song of the Golden Rule

Thomas F. Heck

**The message is the same, though the words we speak may differ,
The message is the same, take a walk in others’ shoes.
See yourself in others’ faces, just imagine trading places;
The Golden Rule’s the same— the whole world through.**

Confucius put it this way— it’s what you shouldn’t do:

“Do not do to others anything that, if it’s done to you,

Would be hurtful or be harmful, or would break your heart in two!”¹

The same is said by Jews² and Hindus,³ and by Muslims⁴ too. . . *Shalom!* (pause)

Refrain: “The message is the same . . . “

The humanists among us, with reason as their guide,

Treat the other with compassion, put enmity aside;⁵

Universalists⁶ exhort us to meet our neighbor’s need,

Regardless of race or color, gender, age, or creed. . . **Indeed!** (*Refrain*)

The Bible says it often, the lesson’s hardly new; in

Leviticus⁷ and Matthew,⁸ the Law and Prophets too;⁹

“Love your neighbor as yourself!” It’s so simple, it’s so true.

“Treat others the very way that others should treat you.”. . . **And you!** (*Refrain*)

¹ Confucius, *Analects*, 15:23.

² “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the law, all the rest is commentary.” Talmud, Shabbat 31a.

³ “This is the sum of Dharma [duty]: do naught unto others that which would cause you pain if done to you.” Mahbharata XIII, 14.

⁴ In Islam, Mohammed’s Farewell Sermon includes the statement, “Hurt no one so that no one may hurt you.”

⁵ “Humanists acknowledge human interdependence, the need for mutual respect, and the kinship of all humanity.” <<http://www.religioustolerance.org/reciproc3.htm>>

⁶ As one [Unitarian Universalist Web site](#) puts it, “Today, many are finding that the Golden Rule doesn’t go quite far enough. Or at least, that it must not be misunderstood in a limited way. A business leader, Dr. Tony Alessandra, puts it this way: “We need to practice the true intent of the Golden Rule, which is, ‘do unto others the way *they* want to be done to.’ ” <<http://uuvisalia.org/justice/golden.html>>

⁷ “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the LORD am your God.” Leviticus 19:34.

⁸ “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” Matt. 7:12.

⁹ See n. 2 above. See also, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself.” Leviticus 19:18. See also Deuteronomy 5:15, reminding us that aliens and servants were equally entitled to rest on the Sabbath.