



*A sermon prepared by Stephen Atkinson, Minister*

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Delivered by Sara Robinson, Sunday Services Committee

## **GOLDEN RULES**

One Saturday night, when I was living in a dormitory at university, the student in the room next to me was up late playing his stereo at top volume. It was a Cheech and Chong album, a comedy group some of you may have been familiar with, but only if you're in the Boomer generation like me. I wasn't cool enough at that time to know much about Cheech and Chong, but my impression is that, if they were around today, they'd be like a cross between Saturday Night Live and, say, Marilyn Manson.

In the cut that was playing, a schoolteacher was trying ever so patiently to bring order into her classroom full of the most unruly students imaginable – at least up until that time, which in retrospect seems very innocent compared to this day and age. Repeatedly, she'd begin with a soft, lady-like voice and gradually escalate in volume and effect until she screamed at the top of her lungs, "SHUT UP!"

Propriety forbids me from demonstrating this exactly, but some of you may remember it. For those who don't, suffice it to say that about every three minutes, my bed would start to bounce and books fall off the shelf onto my head – it was that loud. I thumped on the wall a number of times, and even went out to knock firmly on his door at one point – a knock he didn't answer. (It occurs to me now that perhaps he was passed out in there, but I didn't think of that at the time.) At about 3 a.m. having slept not a moment, after the next "SHUT UP!", I finally responded by screaming the same thing back at him through the wall. At that moment, he turned off the stereo, and I finally got some sleep.

This memory occurred to me as I was thinking about the Golden Rule. In the meditation you heard variations on this ethic that appears in virtually every religion and moral philosophy on our planet. "*Do for one who may do for you, that you may cause him thus to do.*" This actually comes from an ancient Egyptian tale; it's probably the oldest version. "*An it harm no one, do what thou wilt,*" is the most central Wiccan teaching; it counsels us to do whatever we want as long as it doesn't harm anyone, even ourselves. Clearly, what we decide to do must always be carefully thought through, and if we act in our own interest, it must not be at the expense of anyone else.

I've come across Christian exclusivists – and the negative term there is 'exclusivist', not 'Christian' – who claim that there's an essential difference in the positive phrasing: "*Do to others what you would have them do to you,*" as opposed to the negative framing found in, for instance, Zoroastrianism: "*Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others.*" In the Gospel of Matthew, the Golden Rule is preceded by "*Love your neighbor as yourself,*" so some Christians are tempted to claim that they follow a higher standard of the Rule motivated by *love* rather than by the avoidance of unpleasantness. There'd be more to this argument if Jesus had been introducing a new teaching there, but he was actually quoting the *Torah*. And, certainly, neither Christianity nor almost any other religion has an unblemished record of loving neighbors. Any nuance of superiority parsed from grammatical construction is meaningless when held up against the fundamental truth of the ethic itself and the *history* of how those who espouse it actually follow it.

The Golden Rule also appears in Islam, where the proof of one's *faith* hinges upon behaving according to this rule. The Bahá'ís see this ethic as a foundation of justice; what would our justice system be like if this principle were truly at its core? Indigenous religions point out that there's no real separation between beings in any case, so what we do to other living things we do also to ourselves. We Unitarian Universalists relay this ethic in our principles in a way that makes it harder to point to exactly, but the idea is there. "*We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.*"

Having rejected grammatical nuance earlier, I'm going to resort to it here anyway. "Affirm." "Promote." Are those *action words*? Of course, they are verbs which, by definition, are 'action words', but when we say "we affirm and promote" that doesn't say much about what we're actually going to *do*. None of the faith-based Golden Rules ever says exactly what one should or shouldn't do; even those faiths with long lists of holy laws to observe, leave this law undefined. Individual responsibility to choose and to act is expected. We in our faith tend to like this – a lot!

But, if what we're vowing is to "affirm and promote," we'd better know how and when we're doing it. And we'd better do it evidently enough that, if someone else were doing it back to us, we'd get the message loud and clear. As to loving our neighbors as ourselves, that isn't particularly hard for us because usually when we look at our neighbors we actually *see* ourselves. Unitarian Universalists hugely fall into a certain demographic of the middle- to upper-middle class, highly educated and well-to-do. If every one of our fellowships and churches made a map pinpointing where its members lived, we'd find clusters of pins in selected neighborhoods in almost every case. The fact that not all of us live in these cluster neighborhoods is more a sign of the strength of conviction of some of us individually than of the openness and diversity of our communities. Mind you, I know this is less true of those of us living in conservative areas of the

country, but, barring voting patterns and social justice ideals, we're not much different from those we live and work and play beside every day.

My seminary is in Hyde Park on Chicago's south side, and has been kept from inner-city desolation largely by the ongoing investment of the University of Chicago. But the neighborhood is mixed in all conceivable ways, and its very porous boundaries are never far away; a few bus stops and you're in some of the most destitute areas of the city.

Two of my seminary classmates have gone out every Friday afternoon with a carry-all cart filled with second-hand clothes, a big thermos of hot soup and bags of sandwiches; they walk around not far from the school, helping feed the hungry and clothe the shivering and, what's most important, talking to them and learning their names and stories. I can't claim to ever have joined them, so I preach also to myself today.

And what I say to myself and all of us is that we're called to *embody* and *act upon* our first principle, which is in line with the most fundamental ethical standard grounding nearly all human societies and all faiths. Golden Rules are found in every *religious* tradition, but, you may have noticed, not one of those rules has anything to do with God or the supernatural.

The most important teaching in the Hebrew Bible and reiterated by Jesus is to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy strength, but the Golden Rule is *not* about God, even if many who aim to live by it do so because they believe God desires it. The Golden Rule is about human beings and human interaction and human behavior. For this reason, it has the potential to be a source of unity of focus and action not just among everyone in our pluralistic faith: theist, humanist, pagan or agnostic; but to bring all people together in a common purpose.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to embody and act upon this ethic at an increasingly higher standard precisely because the society in which we live is *abandoning* it. Every social ideal we hold can be traced to this Golden Rule, but let's not congratulate ourselves simply for the fact that we *hold* them. We must challenge ourselves to see how we fail to live them and then to act upon them increasingly radically. Let me give some examples of what I mean by 'radical'.

L'Arche is an assisted living program for developmentally challenged adults. L'Arche means "ark" in French, and the significant difference between L'Arche communities and other programs is that they're actually homes: the challenged residents are called "core members" because they are the heart and soul of these homes which wouldn't exist without them. Side by side with them full-time are their "assistants", ordinary folks who feel called to *live in* these communities, not just to work in them.

Henry Nouwen, a theologian who writes extensively about the 'wounded healer', partly because he himself experienced burnout from his academic life at Harvard, moved to the L'Arche community in Toronto where he lived the final decade of his life as an 'assistant'. There, Nouwen learned that the essence of the human being is the *heart* not the *mind*. The core members of L'Arche communities are in that sense exemplary human beings. L'Arche communities are predominantly Roman Catholic.

In Hamilton, Ontario, in Canada, the first Circle of Support and Accountability (CSA) operates for sex offenders who are usually woefully unprepared for life on the outside; many are harassed by and hounded out of the frightened communities in which they attempt to live. This circle began when an offender asked a prison psychologist to link him with the only person outside prison with whom the offender had ever had meaningful contact, a pastor. The pastor and psychologist set up a group of people, a prison chaplain, a member of Neighbourhood Watch, a police officer and some members of the pastor's congregation. The Neighborhood Watch representative is a liaison to the surrounding community who is able to defuse tension by assuring them that safety is the program's paramount goal. The police presence maintains a connection between the authorities and the offender, reducing the tendency to overuse surveillance. This group functions as a holding environment for the offender and as a calming agent for the community. They have no illusions about the possible harm this offender could still do, but they help him out of their feeling of commitment to a suffering fellow human being. Most of its members are liberal Mennonites.

There are, of course, Unitarian Universalists all around our movement who do loudly and clearly act in ways that affirm and promote human worth and dignity. There is the group in San Francisco, the Faithful Fools who now have a community minister beginning to work here in Vancouver, the recently ordained Rev. Laura Friedman, affiliated with the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. Faithful Fools choose to live with the homeless on the street for periods of time; they do this both to understand the down and dirty facts of street life, but also to bring whatever they can of their energy and spirit directly to those who are exhausted and beaten down by the difficulties of daily life.

The First Parish of Concord, Massachusetts created the Jericho Road project in which parish members with professional skills volunteer to work as consultants to non-profit organizations and small businesses in disadvantaged communities in Lowell, Massachusetts, down the road.

At First Church Dallas, volunteers every autumn repair a dilapidated home so that its occupant will not be evicted. Recently, we raised over \$1000 and sent it to Child Haven, an international development project we've supported for years, but our Social Responsibility Committee is currently without a Chair.

A teaching like the Golden Rule is an absolute. We can never do it perfectly, but we can always do a little better, bit by bit. I hope this year we can as a church renew our energy to devote it to the *actions* of affirming and promoting the inherent dignity of every person.

I challenge all of us individually, including myself, to find one new way to show what you believe through what you do; it need not be large or difficult. *Today*, especially on Thanksgiving, do for someone else something what you would want them to do for you.

Make the Golden Rule a part of your celebration.