

# A Forgotten Virtue

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. George Hunt McConnel (Sandy) on the occasion of the installation of the Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis as Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield, Wisconsin.

## Scripture - Mathew 7:12

*NRSV* In everything do unto others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

*MB* Here is a simple, rule of thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for *them*. Add up God's Law and Prophets and this is what you get.

*Good as New* Treat others as you would like them to treat you. Then you'll do what God wants without needing to think about the rules.

*J.B. Philips* Treat other people exactly as you would like to be treated by them - this is the essence of all true religion.

## **Sermon:**

I want us to spend some time this afternoon with a forgotten virtue. A virtue we all learned as children but which has fallen out of our lexicon. A virtue for which your next Thanksgiving Dinner and the entire globe is crying out. Yet, a virtue that's not very popular these days. Sadly, we hear little about this virtue in the twenty-first century. In light of recent events and revelations - Harvey Weinstein and Charlie Rose, the Las Vegas shootings, the North Korean missile crisis, expelling the Dreamers, the political rhetoric in our nation's capital - the message of this virtue is particularly poignant. The virtue I wish for us to consider is compassion.

Compassion is both empathetic and sympathetic. It is curious and kind; tender and caring. It truly cares for the other. It motivates people to go out of their way to help the physical, spiritual, or emotional hurts and pains of another. Compassion is embodied in what Christians call the Golden Rule. It's hardly a new concept. People have preached compassion for centuries - from Confucius to Oprah.

Yes, the first person to formulate the Golden Rule, as far as we know, was the Chinese sage Confucius 500 years before Christ. Confucius had a vision in which he saw each person at the center of a constantly expanding series of concentric circles of compassion. And 600 years after Jesus, the Prophet Muhammad said, "None of you is a true believer, unless he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."

All faiths - not just Christianity or Confucianism or Islam - insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality. It brings us into

relation with the transcendence we call God. In his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* Marcus Borg writes, "The Christian life is not primarily about believing the right things or even being good. The Christian life is about being in a relationship with God which transforms us into more and more **compassionate beings**, 'into the likeness of Christ.'"

Each major religion has formulated its own version of what we call the Golden Rule, "Always treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself." Further, they **all** insist that you cannot confine your benevolence to your own group; you must have concern for everybody - even your enemies.

Easier said than done. To be truly compassionate is indeed difficult. It's hard to make room for the other, to negotiate life with a concern for the other. I'm reminded of the *Peanuts* cartoon: Snoopy is philosophical lying on the top of his dog house. "I really embrace the Golden Rule," he says. "The only trouble is, I hate the people next door."

The Golden Rule asks you to look into your own heart and discover what causes you pain and then to refuse under any circumstances to inflict that pain on anybody else. It asks you to make space for the other in your mind and in your heart and in your actions. There is no universal way of doing it. Each situation is different; each individual is different.

Compassion goes beyond just being nice to the other or feeling sorry for the other. It is dynamic; it is challenging; it is active. It is taking responsibility for the pain of others. It is what we do to make our world a more just place.

One of my favorite Frank Sinatra songs is titled *How Little We Know*. "How little we know. How much to discover," sings the crooner. One of the ways in which we grow in our ability to be compassionate is to realize how little we know. All too often

people impose their own experience and beliefs on acquaintances and events, making hurtful, inaccurate, and dismissive snap judgments, not only about individuals but about whole cultures. It often becomes clear, when questioned more closely, that their actual knowledge of the topic under discussion could comfortably be contained on a small postcard.

Yet, we hear it all the time: “Shirley **always** does such and such” or “Jim’s problem is...” as if we knew all about Shirley and Jim. We don’t. Every person we meet is a mystery to us. ***I am a mystery to myself.*** I continually behave in ways that surprise me or that sometimes even shock me. My wife, Alice, says I’m still a mystery to her too! In reality, each person we meet has a history of pain, insecurity and struggle. ***Being compassionate requires trying to be aware of the mystery in ourselves and in others.***

Try an experiment. Stand back and listen to the aggressive certainty that characterizes so much of our discourse these days. Consider your profession or something that really interests you: mysteries, the law, golf, the Green Bay Packers, country music, medicine, history.... Isn't it true that the more you know about this special field of yours, the more acutely you become aware of all you still have to learn? Then notice how disturbing it is to hear somebody talking dogmatically about your subject over dinner or on the radio, making serious mistakes and false claims that are almost physically painful to hear.

As someone has said, “Opinion is the lowest form of human knowledge. It requires no accountability, no understanding. The highest form of knowledge is empathy, for it requires us to suspend our egos and live in another’s world.” ***Compassion is curiosity without assumptions.***

It's so easy to fall into an attitude of judgement no matter what we feel strongly about. Remember how little we know. Why not

change our habits? Instead of preferring to be right, why not prefer to be compassionate?

A few years ago, I heard one of my favorite authors being interviewed twice in one day - on NPR and then on *The PBS Evening News*. Her name is Karen Armstrong. She once was a nun. She left her community and after a series of false starts she became a history of religion scholar. Seven years ago, she came out with a compelling book. It's a twelve step book - titled *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*.

In the book Armstrong suggests that the Golden Rule be applied to nations - not just individuals. She maintains that one of the chief tasks of our time must surely be to build a global community in which all peoples can live together in mutual respect. And, she discovers that religion, which should be helping to solve the problem, is actually a part of the problem.

So, over the internet, she got together a diverse group of people. For a year these people from all different faiths tried to define what it means to be compassionate. They came up with a four paragraph Charter For Compassion. Today this Charter For Compassion hangs on walls all over the world. It is on the Opera House in Sydney, Australia. It hangs in schoolrooms in Pakistan and South Africa. All over the world 50 countries and 96 cities have officially affirmed this Charter For Compassion. Each of these cities - from as far away as Rotterdam in the Netherlands or Bali, Indonesia to as close as Appleton and Neenah, Wisconsin - identified problem issues of compassion for their city, and each have committed to a multi-year action plan to correct them.

And it's all based on the Golden Rule.

Armstrong maintains that compassion is a virtue for our time. Our world is dangerously polarized. "Love thy neighbor" is no longer the underling belief. Instead, the message has grown loud and

clear “fear thy neighbor.” We’ve rewritten the Golden Rule: ***“Do unto others as you are glad they don’t have the means to do unto you.”***

There is a worrying imbalance of power and wealth which has erupted into a growing malaise, alienation, rage, and humiliation - feelings that lead to terrorist atrocities that endanger us all - like 9/11 and The Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings and the poison gas attacks on civilians in Syria. We are engaged in wars that we seem unable either to end or to win. Disputes that were secular in origin, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, have been allowed to fester and become "holy," and once they have become sacred, positions tend to harden and become resistant to pragmatic solutions.

Recently, I saw a quote from an immigrant, Lesley Goldwasser, who came to America from Zimbabwe in the 1980s. Surveying our political scene a few years ago, Lesley said, “You Americans kick around your country like it’s a football. But it’s not a football. It’s a Fabergé egg. You can break it.”

As humans who evolved over centuries, we are driven by brains that encourage us to put ourselves first. When we are threatened in any way, we become angry. We lash out violently. If not physically, then we lash out verbally or on social media, or we run away. These instincts are deep inside us. Instincts that were once necessary for our survival, but which don’t serve us so well in relating to others in the twenty-first century.

For our world in 2018 is a profoundly connected world - electronically connected, economically connected, politically connected. What happens in Iran or Kenya today is likely to have repercussions in England or Greece tomorrow. What happens on the stock exchange in Tokyo will effect markets in New York in seconds. And yet, our morals have not caught up with our technology.

Friends, ***in a world in which individuals and small groups will increasingly have powers of destruction hitherto confined to the nation-state***, it has become imperative to apply the Golden Rule individually and globally, ensuring that all peoples are treated as we would wish to be treated ourselves. ***If our religious and ethical traditions fail to address this challenge, they will fail the test of our time.***

In commenting on the political polarity in America today, the sometimes controversial preacher and author, Jim Wallis puts it this way: ***Neither the left nor the right has the answers now, though both will continue to say that it does. So we (the faith community) have to focus on the spiritual and moral values that bring us together; that choose the common good over private gain, inclusiveness over intolerance, civility over shouting, long term over short term, integrity over celebrity, justice over excuses, morality over expediency, stewardship over consumption, truth over spin, patient persistence over immediate results, compassion over fear.***

Well, okay, just how far should we go to to understand one another's point of view? ***Perhaps the distance grace covers on the cross.***