

GENESIS 45:3-11  
PSALM 37:1-11  
I CORINTHIANS 15:35-38, 42-50  
LUKE 6:27-38

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany  
Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time  
February 20, 2022; Year C

### ***Doing to Others: The Golden Ruler!***

**“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!” These centuries old words constitute the Golden Rule as it has come to be known, though this ultimate expression of an optimistically humanistic and surely demonstrably divine ideal, is a “universal ethical principle,” as one writer called it, is supposedly but much less is also frequently referred to in some remote circles as the “ethic of reciprocity.” Has a nice ring to it, don’t you think? The Golden Rule is a hallmark, a cornerstone, a bedrock foundational principle, a core value, driving the best of our most caring and compassionate intentions as human beings, the fulfilling essence of what constitutes a wondrously amazing idea, filled to overflowing with grace, peace, and merciful love, whether we be of the Christian persuasion or not! One writer opines that “one early use of the word “golden” in English conveys the meaning of ‘most excellent, important, or precious.’ With reference to rules or precepts it was used to mean ‘of inestimable value. . . .’” We certainly understand how the term came to be associated with a certain precious metal, that along with silver, platinum, and palladium, is always highly in demand and makes people go crazy one way or another. Wow, what a rush, a gold rush, that is! Some would argue that the real definition of the Golden Rule is that “the one with the gold rules!” I would add that the Golden Rule is the essence of, the quintessential, definition based in ancient Near Eastern hospitality, a biblically and theologically mandated practice born of the nomads and codified in Bedouin cultural milieu. Another writer notes, the Golden Rule “is arguably the most consistent, most**

prevalent and most universal ethical principle in history. Many regard it as the most concise and general principle of ethics.” Ironically, the phrase has become synonymous with Jesus and Christian faith, appearing in association with both the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s version of the Gospel and in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, the less popular edition, call it the lesser Beatitudes, a profound collection of ancient teachings now attributed to or credited to Jesus but probably never uttered from his lips. This writer goes on to say that “The Golden Rule is found in numerous cultures, religions, ethical systems, secular philosophies, indigenous (Native) traditions, and even in the mathematical sciences (e.g., the golden mean). And because it crosses so many traditions and philosophies, the Golden Rule possesses tremendous moral authority and reveals a profound unity underlying the diversity of human experience.” This writer goes on to add, “The Golden Rule also emphasizes values of mutuality, interdependence, and reciprocity.” In other words, the Golden Rule, commensurate with doing good deeds, with doing good toward others, is always about putting others first, myopically focused, perhaps even fixated on the concerns or the plight of one’s neighbor. The intent of the Golden Rule is perfectly designed to build and foster relationships, job one, beautifully instructing all persons to nurture the best of our human interaction, influencing the many forms human relationships can take. The Golden Rule is an essential component, the key ingredient, in building beloved faith communities in churches such as ours here at First Congregational United Church of Christ. I love how well everyone in this church gets along with one another. I confess I am not used to that!

Yes, indeed, the Golden Rule has had a long and storied career, a rich cross-cultural history transcending and predating the Christian version we Christian types have come to associate with Jesus, the roots of this egalitarian expression wide-ranging among the world’s religions and

cultures. The Golden Rule speaks a timeless and universal truth, crossing the boundaries of the ages! Yes, the Golden Rule confirms and declares an eternal word, transcending the bonds and bounds of time and space, surpassing all conventional wisdom, an invention of sacred quality, offering a glimpse into the mind of the Divine, a hint, perhaps the strongest hint, of holiness. As one writer, tongue-in-cheek suggests, in 1,000,000 BC, “The fictional Fred Flintstone helps a stranger who was robbed and left to die. He says ‘I’d want him to help me.’ Golden rule thinking is born.” And I thought that tale was the parable of the Good Samaritan! Silly me! The writer does make a salient point about our cave-dwelling ancestors, however, in how quickly they surely learned that depending on one another, trusting in one another, living collaboratively by cooperating as hunter-gatherers, everyone pitching in and pulling together to share the bounty of nature’s resources, would enhance their survival as a species, thank God for us, and assure their primitive version of prosperity. From 2000 to 1800 BC, in a resource called *Palatine Hill*, we see some of the earliest, the oldest manifestations of the Golden Rule, including the ancient Egyptian “Tale of the Eloquent Peasant,” declaring, “Do for one who may do for you, that you may cause him thus to do.” There are further examples, just to name a few, including intimations found in the Hebrew Bible, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Homer’s *Odyssey*, Socrates, and a whole bunch more, all of which predate Jesus and then the eventual composition of the Christian scriptures. Sidebar: if you get really bored you can Google “Golden Rule,” you can read for yourself the full list of citations. It is fascinating! No, Jesus did not invent, did not conceive, the Golden Rule, but you can bet your Gospel that Jesus had heard of it and embraced it, and clearly incorporated it into his preaching and teaching, an exemplary loving model showing his followers how to live and love, internalizing its ideals in every way, making it a major, pivotal, primary, plank of his message, a core value of his mission and ministry. And therein is our intersection with this

**endearing and enduring mandate for all of us human beings as we seek to get along with one another in our ever-shrinking global village, a planet that seems to be getting smaller and smaller by the day. Yes, that includes you, Vladimir Putin and other nationalistic and proprietary despots and zealots, fanatics all. Please, please, get the damn memo! What a narcissistic fool!**

**One of the interesting things about the rule known as golden is that it has a backside, call it an alter ego, a negatively phrased connotation that creates what I would call a bare baseline for living. It goes like this: “do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.” Surely, those who first thought this mantra for living, and those who borrowed, plagiarized, stole, or adapted, said commentary, yes, including the likes of the Rabbi Jesus, a good, no, excellent teacher indeed, were thinking way outside the box, far beyond the limiting confines of their comfort zones, to perceive something greater, far superior to the basics, far more substantial, far more than a mere ideal, yes, something far beyond meeting the bare minimal expectation of our not-so-limited human creative capacity, our human being and doing. Yes, we are called to do something more, something grander, than follow that baseline comment from the Hippocratic Oath, stating, “First, do no harm!” Seriously! Even so, if humanity could somehow capture the imagination, a glimpse of all that is possible, and manage to even remotely embrace that low level of functionality, this pedestrian degree of rarified tolerance, what a grand and glorious chance we would have at creating a better local and global society, what a better world this would be, what an accepting and affirming, open and loving place our global civilization could become, almost utopia, the rarified air of a mythologically motivated embodiment of heaven on earth, yes, perceiving more than a glimpse of the realm of God realized in real time. If we could just somehow imagine, if we could capture our own imagination, use our creative visualization, and seize that sacred moment in time for all**

**time! In all honesty, the bar has been and continues to be set way too low for our simpleton lives when we consider the least we can do, the least we can manage, in terms of how we choose to live our lives, especially, specifically, in how we relate to other human beings, especially those considered or classified as “others,” yes, the way we engage and embrace, or lack thereof, those on the fringes, the dispossessed, disenfranchised, those who are marginalized in any way whatsoever, yes, the ones Jesus called “the least of these.” Yes, the way we treat, the way we interact, with all creation, all creatures great and small, everything animate and inanimate—animal, vegetable, and mineral—is a window into our individual and collective character. Yes, that about covers it! The Golden Rule is a good rule instructing us in how to live our lives, the various and myriad ways we encounter and engage all that God has made, taking into account how we partake of our necessary consumption of the earth’s resources, choosing to care for the environment right down to the tiniest and seemingly most insignificant and irrelevant.**

**Yes, by invoking the Golden Rule in every aspect of our lives, living by its simplest precept, we could do the miraculous, doing the very things God has emboldened, empowered, us to do. God will not do for us that which we can do for ourselves! Despite the limitations inherent within our limited understanding of the unending vastness of the universe, redundant repetition intentional, we finite creatures, as mortal as we are, could quickly bring an end to wars and rumors of wars. We have the intelligence, the intellectual capacity, the God-given ability, as critical thinkers, to slow climate change, to stop it in its tracks, bringing it to a halt, full stop, reducing or eliminating global warming on a dime, making it a non-starter, yes, the proverbial no sequitur, yesterday’s news, allowing a tomorrow, a pollution free, greenhouse gas free, ozone destroying free tomorrow, creating a bright future for generations to come, yes, your children, grandchildren, greatgrandchildren and so on and so on, even for far**

**radical rightwing Republican QAnon conspiracists and other “antivaccers,” climate-change deniers. Cheap shot! Yes, where one conspiratorial nutjob goes, they all go, following like lemmings! They truly live in an odd world, an alternative universe from the rest of us at least somewhat sane individuals! Care for the earth! Care for each other! Indeed, we could even achieve world peace in a world sorely lacking in peace! Yes, the proverbial sky is the limit for us unlimited human creatures if we would embrace and practice the Golden Rule, doing unto others that which we would have them do unto us! It all begins by acknowledging that all persons are our neighbors, brothers and sisters, divine siblings all! Wow! What a thought! What a bonus! What a blessing! All these inherently divine gifts, all of which are literally at our daily disposal, each one willingly and gladly accepted and embraced, joyfully and gleefully received, if we are able to creatively envision, to capture that visionary level of giving, meeting that lofty degree of divine reciprocity, learning how to intentionally apply the rubrics of the Golden Rule to every aspect of living, every encounter and engagement, every serendipitous moment of gracious and glorious interaction, what a difference would be manifest in all our lives. We need a big “when” not an “if” or “maybe”!**

What immediately strikes me about the Golden Rule is that it is not a call to faithfulness, requiring even the most modest, minimalist faithful initiative, demanding no level of belief, none of it necessary, but rather as a call to arms, yes and legs, a call to action, to actively participate in the world even as that extravagant idea begins within our immediate circles. Jesus doesn't say anything here about following me, believing in me, accepting me as your personal Lord and Savior, becoming a Christian and a member of a church, none of which had been invented during his brief lifetime. There was no requirement to believe in Jesus in any particular or special way, or accept certain dogma, including dogmatic doctrinal and creedal statements, all of which were never a part of Jesus' narrative, all of which were developed by the early

Church shortly and “longly” after Jesus’ death. Yes, serving Jesus was a matter of following, not a matter of believing. Jesus’ followers chose to follow or not, never condemned, never rebuked, no negative commentary judging them for their thoughtful consideration and decision. Oh, how we have gotten it wrong in our post-Puritan, nineteenth century evangelistic and revivalist maddening furor! This “getting saved” myopic obsession on the part of fundamentalist evangelical types has long stunted and warped, perverted our imposed guilt-ridden impressions of what it means to be a Christian in the Protestant tradition, a heritage ironically exemplified by freedom, freedom of conscience and religious participation. You will remember that it was Jesus who shunned the weightiest layers of traditional religion, specifically the rules and regulations, inane and insane rubrics, that were stifling, suffocating then in his own faith tradition and continue as a terribly oppressive legacy. However, Jesus managed to continue to honor his forebears, even as a peasant reformer who wanted little part of any of what constituted then and now as institutional baggage, except the parts he continued to value! After all, Jesus did continue to be a regular attendee at Temple and synagogue services. So, there was that!

So much of the early Church’s ecclesial and theological creations, its perverse inventions, many of them the oddest, the strangest nonsensical conglomerations of thoughtful, uh, thoughtless, mutations, were all devised to defend orthodoxy and weed out heretics, a convenient way to out and oust them and subsequently kill them all, and, of course, to show who was right and who was wrong. Yes, complete and utter nonsense, a total waste of time and energy. This narrow religious perspective with all its life-draining rules, regs, and rituals, all these inane and obtuse things we supposedly are forced, coerced to believe, coopted to get our ticket punched, in order making us a true-blue believer, a real faithful Christian. This formulaic nonsense has a long history, over two thousand years in the making, bizarrely

perfected in a most imperfect way, containing the same DNA, the same modus operandi, the same nonsense proffered and perpetuated, spewed, by today's zealots, narrow-minded sectarian bigots who masquerade as true and loyal defenders of the faith of the fathers, not so much the mothers, trying to root out the great unwashed wherever they might think they have found them. Same song, second verse; a whole lot louder and a whole lot worse!" NOT! Thank God, at least no one dies today because of heresy unless they do! Where is the love, the grace, the mercy, the peace, the Golden Rule, in any of that oppressive, un-Jesus-like foolishness? Religion should free, embolden and empower, never oppress! No, in the eyes of Jesus, belief was secondary if it even rated or ranked at all, if it was even necessary in the least! The essence of the gospel in the Gospels, of course, all of which naturally is very Jesus-like stuff, the very embodiment of the man from Nazareth, was a plain and simple, the clearest forthright word, and so it remains until this very moment in time, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!" There are some who just do not seem to get it! What part of that sacred, sacrosanct, sacrificial, statement do we not understand? It really is a case of ask and answer! Be something! Do something! Make a difference! None of what you believe can do any of that, can change any of that, except when and where it does! So yes, hopefully what we think, what we believe, the one in whom we choose to place our faith, the one will inform and impact our lives and our living each and every day we have breath.

One thing we are certain is happening in this twenty-first century postmodern age is that lots of people, particularly young adults and younger, are fleeing the steeple at an alarming rate, turning our church facilities into museums, relics, dinosaurs of the past. No matter our ecclesial or theological stripe, the institutional Church, understood as an entity suffocating under the weight of an organizational malaise, seems to countless individuals as meaningless, not-so-suddenly irrelevant, and out of touch with contemporary concerns or values.



While some blindly but intentionally dig in their heels while sticking their heads in the proverbial sand of orthodox minutiae, swearing an unquestioned allegiance as a brand of honor and fidelity, inflexibly, rigidly, loyal to a pathetic, a pitiful Pollyanna piety of a most pedestrian value, all while demand this kind of narrow orthodoxy of everyone else, thank God there are others who are taking a more expansive and progressive, radically cutting edge, approach, extravagant viewpoints. Even so, despite this external and internal struggle, both brands, so to speak, are still struggling for viability. Unfortunately, the ship is sinking even with this somewhat recent initiative, hoping to inject some much needed, lifegiving oxygen into the system. The goal of every local missional church should be to become relevant and relational, vibrant and vital, though that lofty goal seems light years removed from our reality. One thing that we are learning is that potential candidates for attendance and membership under the auspices of steeple life are mostly, even solely, concerned with what the local church sees as its purpose, the mission and ministry that drives its passion, fulfilling the essence of social justice. They want to know what a church does, far more than what it believes. They want action! They want mission more than words! Frankly, most of them could care less about fidelity to the relics of the past incased in doctrinal and creedal orthodoxy, traditional beliefs that were created by the early Church after Jesus' demise to pad their patriarchal power. Yes, just to name a few, they are not concerned about virginal births, bodily resurrections, literal Bibles with literal miracles, in other words inerrant and infallible, second coming nonsense, and the substitutionary atonement, interpreting Jesus at the ultimate lamb, the ultimate sacrifice demanded by an angry, vengeful, wrathful, retributive malevolent deity. They do not care and neither do I! They consider mostly irrelevant these dictums, sacred cows, these five fundamentals crystalized in perpetuity, an unfortunate posterity indeed, galvanized by nineteenth century evangelical hardliners. Most of these theological adaptations are nothing more than human made theological inventions, created in the mind as human born mutations,

devoid of love and everything that Jesus preached and taught, the very loving things for which he stood and gave his life in full unequivocal, unconditional, support. Irony of ironies! I say these things thanking God that this is a free pulpit being heard by objective, critically thinking, Christians who gladly consider such idea. As John Avalon said on MSNBC in a discussion about his new book, *Lincoln and the Fight for Peace* noting that slavery was conveniently replaced by segregation, a sin born during reconstruction, claiming, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will catch hell from all sides." Perhaps I resemble that remark! Maybe I do not! I would be proud to earn that title along with its residual!

Every time I see a commercial with old man Graham's boy, Franklin, a chip not off the old block, I cringe when Billy's son offers his simplistic and naïve approach to solving life's crises by advocating that an individual simply pray and prayer and all your troubles will be magically whisked away immediately. As we all know, there are no quick fixes in life. Someone may need intensive therapy or a social service agency, while others may need to call the Suicide Hotline, or who knows what? The idea that a prayer can assuage someone's deep-seated troubles and make everything just fine is ludicrous. This hostage taking, manipulative, prayer of God advocated by Franklin Graham is based in, nothing more than, a formulaic quid pro quo transactional purchase, blood being the currency used to seal the deal. "The very idea," as my southern mother used to say about something she deemed absurd, that God would employ an out-of-date abusive parental idea that "this is going to hurt me a lot more than it is going to hurt you," before beating the crap out of a kid. My dad used a western belt, complete with horses and riders, making identical welts on my reddened skin. Can you imagine a God of loving grace, mercy, and peace, tossing one of God's prized children, the very *imago Dei*, into the permanence of a lake of fire, claiming innocence, no responsibility, looking away while one of the divine images takes its first forced leap into the fires of

eternal brimstone all because that person failed to either get the memo, was overwhelmed with doubt, skepticism or cynicism, or simply refused to drink the Kool Aid and pray the magic, perfunctory, quid pro quo, formulaic, transactional prayer. Hopefully, we never choose to believe in or serve God based on whatever favors we think we can get in return! As strange or odd as these ideas may seem today, these were the musings, the conclusions, of an early Church hellbent on keeping these fledgling Christians in check and under control, spawning a mutant belief system that is still widely popular, remains in vogue in many circles, proudly practiced by the chosen frozen, today. For them God quit speaking at the close of the canon of our Bible! Folks, let's say it again, God is still speaking and does not utter, utter nonsense! Brains are always welcome as is everyone who has one, "no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey!" Check your religiosity and your pious assumptions at the door. They are no longer needed, as if they ever were! No, these pronouncements were never imagined, considered, or made by the humble Rabbi, our brother and friend, loving sibling and mentor, companion extraordinaire, Jesus of Nazareth. If only history could absolutely, beyond all equivocation, verify this. Despite our best scholarly assumptions about these ecclesial and theological acclamations created in this period fostering darkness and light, following Jesus' death, when he could no longer clarify or offer a counternarrative, offering what would forever remain a conflicting and minority opinion, we seem stuck in it and with it.

**What I wish to simply and succinctly convey today is, that no matter from whence the Golden Rule originated, with whom or with what religious or philosophical persuasions it came, no matter its origin, perhaps born in many contexts and cultures, what I do know is that it originated with God, it was created, invented, and first articulated and interpreted by a God of unconditional love, unconditional, being the operative word here, yes, from the very foundation of the universe and this great big, wide world spinning within it. Yes, God**

**first and foremost and for always has extended a divine olive branch, doing so with no qualifications, no equivocations, no exceptions, no ifs, ands, or buts. God has given a wonderful gift in giving humanity the gift of the Golden Rule and the Golden Rule has no loopholes, no escape clauses. The Golden Rule is simple, love God, love neighbor, love self! Period! In the words of the prophet Micah, do justice, yes, social justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. You cannot go wrong if you can master those tricks! And so, the word from God and the word from each one of us to the other is simply this, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!" Actually, on second thought, or upon further review, what if we chose to do more for others than we wanted them or expected them to do to us! What a difference that would make in our outlook on life! May we all be blessed to become golden rulers! End of discussion! End of sermon!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and has created each and every one of to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. In so doing, we do unto God! Amen and amen!**