THE GOLDEN RULE. CAN IT BE IMPROVED? YOU BET!

Sermon preached by the Rev. Lilia Cuervo
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Many years ago, I used to think that one of the best goals in one’s life was to follow the Golden Rule, particularly because I thought Jesus had authored it. The fact is that we don’t know who first enunciated this rule or when. What is certain is that through the centuries many cultures have cherished this rule as a pattern of good and moral behavior. Buddha, who was born 500 years before Christ, enunciated the Golden Rule in this manner, “One should seek for others the happiness one desires for oneself.” The Romans enunciated the Golden Rule thus, “The law imprinted on the hearts of all men (and I would add all women) is to love the members of society as themselves.” And the Greeks said: “Do not that to a neighbor which you would take ill from.” Aristotle in 325 before Christ, said: We should behave towards others as we wish others to behave towards us. Hillel the Elder, born few years before Christ, when asked by a Gentile to summarize the Law said, “What you yourself hate, don’t do to your neighbor. This is the whole Law; the rest is commentary. Go now and learn.” And, Jesus being a Jew himself, enunciated the Golden Rule in a similar way. According to Matthew 7:12 he said: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

At first, the substance of the Golden Rule appears to be empathy; that quality that allows us to vicariously feel the pain and joys of the other. Under closer scrutiny, however, the essence of this rule becomes self-knowledge. That is why, under certain circumstances, practicing the Golden Rule could be next to impossible. When we don’t know ourselves, how can we know how to treat others according to the way we want to be treated? When we don’t love and respect ourselves enough to be able to shake loose from destructive, addictive behaviors, how can we love or respect others? When we lack self-esteem, it is very difficult to appreciate others for their real value; either we idealize those who we deem superior to ourselves, or disregard those we feel are just like us, or even beneath us.

Under other circumstances, practicing the Golden Rule even with the best of our intentions, could have negative consequences altogether. For example, when we have different tastes and values from those of the people with whom we interact, by treating them the way we want to be treated, we can invite disappointments and often resentment on their part. Have you ever been invited to a dinner where the host served you a good portion of meat without thinking that you were a vegetarian? Or vice versa have you been served mounds of tofu when all you craved was meat and potatoes? Living in the Boston Area, and for that matter in this country with so many and such different cultures, were we to treat everyone according to our own customs, giving them our own type of food and offering only our religious beliefs, disregarding theirs, naturally we would cause dissatisfaction and even go to war.
My first epiphany regarding the weakness of the Golden Rule happened when I heard the Rev. Elinor Artman, a Unitarian Universalist minister, mention precisely that problem with the rule. She said that if we wanted peace in our families, the Golden Rule was not enough, and that a platinum rule that helps one pay attention to the needs of others is what we really needed. Elinor’s idea of course is not originally hers. Centuries ago, the Hindus had said: “The true rule is to guard and do by the things of others as they do by their own.” Mohammed, Thoreau, and Kant have upgraded the Golden Rule in different ways. For example, Mohammed said: Let none of you treat his brother in a way which he would dislike to be treated. Thoreau criticizing the Golden Rule stated: Absolutely speaking, “Do unto others as you would that they do unto you,” is by no means a golden rule, but the best of current silver. An honest man would have but little occasion for it.” Kant, the great thinker, felt that the Golden Rule was not precise in telling us what to do, and added to it the following universal criterion for behavior: Act according to laws which can at the same time be made a universal law of conduct. Therefore, before acting, one should ask questions such as: What would happen if everybody were to act the same way I am about to act? In Matthew 7:9-10, Jesus himself asked the following practical question that could lead us also beyond the Golden Rule. He said: Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?

In upgrading the Golden Rule I like that kind of more personal and to-the-core approach. A Platinum Rule enunciated like this for example: Do unto others as they would like to be done unto. More simply, "Treat others in the way they like to be treated."

Practicing the Golden Rule is difficult. Practicing the platinum rule could be even more challenging. This is because in order to treat others the way they want to be treated, obviously, requires knowing the other person. This in turn requires “to guard” as the Hindu rule advises. It requires us to pay attention, to be thoughtful. It requires shifting the center of attention from our self to the other. Moreover, it requires the will to negotiate and compromise and to give of our self. It requires that we devote time and be creative in our relationships. But most of all, it requires that we learn to establish good communication.

During the first years of my marriage, I lived under the illusion that my then husband and I had excellent communication because we used to have such good conversations on all kinds of subjects, and because we were such good friends. However, at the time, I was psychologically less mature, and many times I didn’t even know what was it, that I wanted. At other times when I knew, and things were not the way I expected or wanted them to be, I was unable to be open about it, for fear of making myself vulnerable.

Because we loved each other I also had this fantasy that he should be able to read my mind at all times, and that he should know what I needed in all aspects of my life. Notice that I said “he should be able”, not “we should be able” to read each other minds... In my immaturity, I did not have the capacity to realize the injustice I was committing with the person I loved. And, having little self-esteem myself, I underestimated both, his capacity for understanding my humanness and his strength of character to stand the truth, would have I objected to his behavior.
Since then, I have talked to many people and I have learned that I was not the only one suffering from the mind-reading illusion, or, from the fear of becoming vulnerable. Now, I reflect how much better my relationships are, when I am willing to learn what it is that the other needs from me, and when I am willing and able to fulfill that need. That is true openness and true empathy. If only I would practice them more often.

At every Christmas my rational mind is challenged listening to some of the depictions in the Carols we sing. Take for example the carol that goes: *The child, the child, trembling in the cold, let us bring him silver and gold, let us bring him silver and gold.* Just think, how much better it would be for that cold child trembling in the cold if we were to sing *let us bring him blankets and warmth, let us bring him blankets, and warmth.*

And it is not that I do not understand the symbolism that offering silver and gold represent. I do. But, when you are physically cold, not even diamonds by the pound can make you warm. Baby Jesus was not the only one who got the wrong presents, though. Some of us had, and will have, under the Christmas tree, or for our birthdays beautifully wrapped evidence of the lack of empathy on the part of some family and friends. And who among us has never made that mistake? One of my earliest cultural shocks in this country was learning that the day after Christmas is the one of the busiest, if not the busiest day in the United States. All over the country, crowds rush to return or exchange the wrong gifts they received for Christmas. Why this phenomenon? I would venture to say that the root cause of it is the absence of the Platinum Rule: *Buy for others as they would like us to buy for them.* All that agonizing about what to give, to end up giving things in the wrong size, the wrong color, the wrong kind of material, or to just end up plainly giving the wrong gift. And the irony of it all is that this happens year after year, in a country where there is a staggering abundance of choices to please everyone. If only we could pay attention to the needs, the taste, and the wishes of the other.

But, nowhere else is the disregard for the needs of others more blatant than in the field of international philanthropy. In *The Lords of Poverty,* one can read case after case of big companies getting enormous tax deductions by sending their surpluses and obsolete inventories to the developing world. Imagine the revolting case of a large company dumping electric blankets by the thousands in an African tropical country, where only a tiny minority has electricity and where the heat and the humidity are intense even at night.

One of the most amazing images on TV was that of the immense warehouse filled with thousands of stuffed toys, trinkets and other non-descriptive gifts sent to the mourning people of Newtown. Although sent with the best of intentions and compassion, just imagine the burden imposed on the town to dispose properly of all those gifts. If only people had practiced the Platinum rule and learned what was needed or wanted before applying the Golden rule. Before buying gifts let us make sure that they are from the heart, supporting, affirming gifts. Let us follow this rule: *Give to others as they would like to be given to.*
For us, Unitarian Universalists, who attempt to proclaim and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, who have as a goal to treat others with justice, equity, and compassion, and who affirm and proclaim the reverence for the interconnected web of all existence, it is imperative that we upgrade the Golden Rule and that we make the Platinum Rule the guide in our interactions with others.

For us members and friends of First Parish who every Sunday recite the covenant we made with one another and with all we hold sacred to answer the call of love, we will do well if we were vigilant in applying the Platinum Rule by learning to *Love others the way they like to be loved*. By doing this we would be able to understand each other’s hunger for spirituality, for community, for social action, for support in the search for truth, and for spiritual spaces conducive to the creation of the Beloved Community. But not only would we understand each other’s needs and hungers, we would make sure that they would be taken care of. Then, we, as humans and as religious community, would have truly reached the kingdom of justice and peace here on earth. Then we really become the Beloved Community we aspire to become. Let us make it so. Blessed be.

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The circle of Love