

“Thou Shalt Do Unto Others As You Would Have Them Do Unto You” 1

Sermon I in the Year-Long Series

“Ten Commandments for the 21st Century”

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach

Sunday, September 12, 2010

I and, indeed, most biblical scholars have no reliable idea about how the original Ten Commandments actually came into being -- that is lost to antiquity -- but I like Mel Brooks' wild sense of humor.

Which brings me to my sermon series for this year, where I will offer for your thoughtful consideration “**10 Commandments for the 21st Century**” a new (and dare I say updated?) list of “do’s and don’ts” for humanity to follow in these modern times, that might enable us to create a humane and habitable future together on this fragile planet of ours. Now some people in our community here in Vero Beach (most especially conservative Christians) might think it is presumptuous (or even blasphemous!) of me – as Unitarian Universalist minister living in the 21st Century – to offer such a list. But I am certain that, regardless of how wise or inspired the ancient list of Jewish commandments (compiled for a pre-literate, tribal, agrarian people centuries ago) were, we living in this increasingly complex and challenging 21st Century need additional ethical and spiritual direction if we are to behave in ways that will enable us to achieve together a habitable and humane future on this planet.

So this morning, I want to get started...and suggest for your consideration the first -- and to my mind foremost -- commandment that we need for these modern times...a commandment that I am surprised (frankly) was **NOT** included in the original list which Moses is reported to have brought down from the heights of Mt Sinai for the people of Israel...namely that we human beings should constantly strive to “**do unto others as we would have them do unto us.**”

Several months ago – when I began pondering the original Ten Commandments in preparation for developing this sermon series -- I was immediately struck by the fact that this crucial and fundamental ETHICAL PRINCIPLE (of treating others as you yourself wish to be treated) was **MISSING (totally missing!)** from the original list. No where in the Ten Commandments does it even vaguely imply that we human beings should “**Do unto others as we would have them do unto us.**” As you can see from the original list which I included in my introduction to this series, there are commandments here about honoring God and parents, keeping the Sabbath, and not stealing, bearing false witness, committing adultery, or murder...but not a word about simply treating all human beings with the compassion, empathy and respect we want for ourselves!

This is a striking omission, for as you can see from the second insert I had enclosed in this morning’s order of service, “**The Golden Rule**” (or what is often called in theological circles “**The Ethic of Reciprocity**”) the Golden rule is **THE UNIVERSAL AND CENTRAL MORAL AND ETHICAL TENET** of all the world’s major religions...including, of course, Judaism, from which the original ten commandments spring. As you will note from my list (and look now -- if you will -- at “**Judaism**”), in the book of Leviticus (which largely concerns itself with Jewish ethical law) the Golden Rule is stated powerfully and simply, “**Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thy self.**” And the Talmudic scholar Hillel (who was a contemporary of Jesus) states this same injunction in a kind of OPPOSITE (and perhaps less spiritually pro-active) way, “**What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.** **This is the whole Torah** [the whole of Jewish law and teaching]; **all the rest is commentary.**” So given the centrality of this ethical principle in Jewish thought (that each person should treat all other persons with decency, gentleness and respect), I cannot explain why Moses (or whomever actually compiled the Ten Commandments, for biblical scholars aren’t sure of the list’s authorship, but most mainstream scholars assume that it was compiled and edited “by a committee”) why whomever put this ancient list of Jewish commandments failed to include it.

In any case, the Golden Rule -- as you can see from this list I compiled – is **the Golden Ethical Thread** that runs through all the world’s great religions (and even though Unitarian Universalism is a relatively small religion, I have included us in the list, because even though our religious movement is not “great” in size, we have some “great” religious and ethical ideas, including our first principle which calls upon us to promote and defend “**The inherent worth and dignity of every person**” so I included us in the list) This affirmation puts us on the same ethical page with all the world’s great religions. As religion writer John Spritzler puts it:

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Different religions understand God and the supernatural differently, but when it comes to human relations in the everyday, world they all agree on The Golden Rule. All of the world’s major religions embrace some version of The Golden Rule.

In her very important book, **The Great Transformation: the Beginnings of our Religious Traditions** [SCOTT HOLDS UP A COPY OF THE BOOK] religious historian Karen Armstrong points out that in the Ninth to Second Century BCE (the so called Axial Age before the time of Jesus) four distinct religious traditions that have had an incredible impact of humanity’s religious sensibilities – Confucianism and Taoism in China...Hinduism and Buddhism in India...monotheism in the Middle East (that being Judaism and Islam) and philosophical rationalism in Greece) all spiritually moved (in response to the violence and inhumanity of their age) to articulate a new ethic of empathy and compassion toward all human beings everywhere. I briefly quote her: **“The Axial Age...was pivotal to the spiritual development of humanity...the prophets, mystics, philosophers and poets of the Axial Age [taught] a spirituality of empathy and compassion...they insisted the people...abandon their egoism and greed, violence and unkindness...[and embrace] respect for the sacred rights of all [persons]...each tradition [she concluded] developed its own formulation of The Golden Rule...[the Axial traditions all taught that] if people behaved with kindness and generosity to their fellows, they could save the world.”**

Armstrong’s historical work (on this central ethical principle of humanity) has led her to unveil a brave new spiritual project for humanity, **“The Charter for Compassion,”** which our district Executive, the Rev. Kenn Hurto spoke about in his sermon here at the Fellowship on July 18th of this year. I quote from the charter, **“The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity, and respect.”** ...We urgently need [Armstrong concludes] **to make compassion a clear, luminous, and dynamic force in our polarized world.”**

As I thought about all this – about the imperative to live compassionately in this troubled world of ours– I realized that next Summer (when I finalize this sermon series and prepare it hopefully for wider distribution) I will make this commandment **“Thou Shalt Do Unto Others As You Would Have Them Do Unto you”** the FIRST (and most important commandment) for humanity as it moves into the 21st Century. What could be ethically more important than striving to practice the Golden Rule in all our human interactions and dealings?

Now...at first blush, The Golden Rule seems eminently simple...every one of these religions states this ethical principle in just a few words (and, by the way, I think I was most struck when compiling this list by the way the Yoruba people of West Africa put it, **“One [who is] going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts”**... that is such a simple, concrete and clear metaphoric image). But what – what in the astounding complexity of all human relationships worldwide – what does it actually mean to **“do unto others as you would have them do unto you?”** When you begin to think about all of humanity and the intricate web of all human interaction, that is almost too big and complex a question to address...most particularly in a brief sermon on a Sunday morning! The Golden Rule (as this list proves) can be simply stated, but surely none of us IS FOOLISH ENOUGH TO THINK that this great AND DEMANDING “Ethic of Reciprocity” is simple to live out on a daily basis...on all the different levels of relationships, interaction and interrelatedness we have with other human beings (near and far...familiar and stranger).

That being said...permit me to try (as best I can) to articulate at least SOME of what “The Golden Rule” (this first, great ethical commandment) implies to us about how we ought to live our lives (with others) on this planet. First...it seems to me that if one is going to attempt (in one’s life) to live up the high humane standard of **“The Golden Rule”** one must attempt to do so in two spheres of human being -- both in one’s:

- 1) PERSONAL, INDIVIDUALIZED, RELATIONAL LIFE and
- 2) inn one’s LIFE AS A CITIZEN OF SOCIETY AS A WHOLE.

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First, striving to live out the golden Rule in one's personal, individualized, relational life. I would suggest to you that **“doing unto others as you would have them do unto you”** all boils down to living your daily life (to the greatest extent possible...and God knows we are all imperfect about this, and there are also natural limits on this) living your daily life (with the other human beings in your immediate proximity) with as much KINDNESS, CIVILITY, UNDERSTANDING AND GENEROSITY as you can muster. I think we all have a general idea of what this means. It means (in the bump and tumble and hurry of daily life) dealing as gently as you can with others (you come in contact with) in both thought and deed. It means acknowledging (in all the little ways that count) the inherent worth and dignity of people we meet. It means manners and courtesy. It means regularly deferring to the needs and desires of others whenever possible or appropriate. It means refraining from actions (over which you have control) that you know will bring unnecessary sorrow or hurt to others. It means opening doors so that others may enter...listening attentively (and affirmingly) to what others are saying...expending time and energy and resources so that others may thrive...setting aside your own gratification so that others may be fulfilled. Practicing the Golden rule requires **the regular and purposeful setting aside of self**, for the benefit of others.

Let me say all of this in a slightly different way. Every human being, of course, regularly looks out for him or herself. Living “The Golden Rule” doesn't mean setting all that aside...it simply means that you work to achieve a **healthy, caring balance in your life** between:

- 1) tending to the well-being of self (which, again, as self-interested self-protecting animals we must all do), and
- 2) tending to the well-being of others (which as social creatures obliged to live in close proximity to others we must also do if we are to live peaceably and well).

All healthy and responsible human beings (it seems obvious to me) have:

- 1) an **INNER-AND-SELF-DIRECTED LIFE** (where we naturally and selfishly focus upon our own needs and comforts) **and** (at the same time),
- 2) an **OUTER-AND-OTHER-DIRECTED LIFE** (where we naturally and compassionately focus upon the needs and comforts of others).

“The Golden Rule” (in our religion and in all the world's great religions) reminds us of the absolute moral and ethical importance of tending to (and regularly cultivating) our **outer-and-other-directed lives**...making sure (in our daily interactions and relationships) that we touch other life around us (most especially but not exclusively touching other human beings) with as much kindness, care, concern and compassion as we can. This great commandment... **“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”**...morally reminds us that there is a great commonality and connection between human beings everywhere, and that each of us must do what we can to bring that dignity, comfort, and contentment which we want for our own lives, into the lives of others. Living by this commandment means that you live a life HIGHLY ATTENTIVE AND ATTUNED TO OTHERS...a life marked by ready empathy and sympathy and compassion. It is a life-long and demanding journey, of course -- this business of striving to live your life evermore caring for others as you would be cared for yourself -- but it is perhaps the most important path any of us as human beings can be on. I like the way British philosopher Aldous Huxley once put this, **“It is a bit embarrassing,”** he wrote, late in his distinguished career, **“to have been concerned with the human problem all one's life, and to find at the end that one has no more to offer by way of advice than this...Try to be a little kinder.”** I saw a bumper sticker on a car the other day which pretty much affirmed the same thing, it simply said, **“Dear Lord, Help Me To Be the Person My Dog Thinks I Am”** Believe it or not, this simple affirmation of kindness and courtesy is what “The Golden Rule” looks like in our daily lives.

But it is not enough, surely, just to strive to live out this great ethical commandment (of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you) in your personal, individualized, relational life. As I said earlier in the sermon, we must also live out this great commandment in our social lives...in our lives as public citizens of the human family...as members of the various communities which give our lives their context and shape. As I have said, It's ethically important (of course) in your daily routine to hold the elevator door for a stranger who is racing down the hall to catch it...or to take a few minutes to chat with your worried co-worker who has a sick child at home...or to

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listen to your own kid describing the (utterly boring to you) details of latest episode of their favorite TV show...or to give the cash back to the store clerk who mistakenly gave you an extra \$10.00 bill that would come out of her next paycheck...or to regularly be charitable in your financial giving. This is what **The Golden Rule** looks like in the mundane flow of any of our lives. But we must also practice **The Golden Rule** as CITIZENS, and do whatever we can – AS CITIZENS -- to ensure that all other human beings have access to the quality and dignity of life we demand for ourselves.

If, for example, we Americans (living, by in large, **blessed and comfortably** here in Vero Beach) learn that many disadvantaged children in our land are going to bed hungry (as we would never willfully allow to happen to our own children), then we must work with other citizens and leaders to put governmental food programs in place to alleviate this suffering. And if we know there are hundreds of thousands of families who find themselves unemployed and homeless, then we must do what we can to make sure our government (and other agencies) provides job training and affordable housing to enable these people to get back on their feet. The point here is that the great commandment of – “**Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you**” -- MORALLY APPLIES TO WHOLE SOCIETIES AS WELL AS INDIVIDUALS...and as citizens (who – dare I remind everyone -- **share responsibility for the shape and substance of our free society**) we must speak up and act up in defense of human dignity...our own dignity (of course) that goes without saying...and (by moral extension) the dignity of every last man, woman and child on the planet. And we do this because (and Karen Armstrong dreams in her “Charter for Compassion”) we know, deep to our hearts, of our indissoluble connection with all other human beings...this is the incredibly high moral standard of **The Golden Rule**.

It is precisely this **vital sense of our indissoluble belonging to and interconnection with all other human persons** which drives and inspired all the social justice and community service work here at our Fellowship. Here, as Unitarian Universalists, we know that our religious principles and values demand that we work to bring human comfort and dignity to all who suffer in life (in dehumanizing situations we ourselves would not ever want to find ourselves). This is why we as a congregation...as a religious community here on the Treasure Coast...we work together (all year long) to bring compassion to our neighbors in need.

I want to briefly remind you now of just some of our social justice projects here at the fellowship which reflect our commitment to “The Golden Rule.” With other congregations, we take our turn providing meals at the **Homeless Family Center** in Vero Beach. We collect hundreds of pounds of food (and dollars) for the **Indian River Food Pantry**, and additionally collect clothing and diapers for others in need. We participate in the **Re-use Exchange of Indian River** to keep our environment clean while we provide arts and craft supplies for worthy organizations. We offer the **Social Justice film Series** (to educate ourselves and the wider community), run the wonderful **Fair Trade Corner**, work to be a **Green Sanctuary** congregation, and maintain a vital relationship with the **UU Service Committee**. We also regularly financially support the **Gifford Youth Symphony**, the **Gifford Youth Activities Center**, and the **Safe Space** shelter for women and children. And then there are our “seasonal” projects, -- collecting Christmas gifts for the children of migrant laborers through **Project Ninos**, and other gifts for the **Vero Beach High School Teen Mothers** program...and other local service projects that periodically catch our attention. I mention all this work NOT so that we can smugly pat ourselves on the back (for all the community good and human service we are doing) but rather to remind ourselves that it is our DUTY AND PRIVILEGE as a congregation to do whatever we can (within the bounds of our limited resources) to make our society and our world more just, humane and peaceful. We should take pride in the fact that, Unitarian Universalists here in Vero Beach, we are actively practicing the great commandment of striving to “**do unto others as we would have them do unto us**”...and let there be no doubt about it...even though we know there is always more to do, we should never doubt that we are already positively affecting the quality of our community and our world.

Look...everyone here this morning realizes just how very much work there is to do on behalf of social justice and human dignity...the justice and service demands of this world border on the impossible! We all know what a hard and difficult and implacably painful place this world can be. In our individual daily rounds, we see so much dehumanization, sorrow and suffering...and when we look beyond the narrow confines of our own (largely

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comfortable) private lives, we see a world that so often seems teetering out of all sanity, decency and control. But we must always trust – deep to the heart – that no matter how INSIGNIFICANT and POWERLESS we might at times feel, there is always, always something SIGNIFICANT and POWERFUL we can do for the sake, dignity (and well-being) of other human beings. As individuals (right where we live on the Treasure Coast in our homes, and neighborhoods and workplaces)...and as citizens (of this amazing, spinning whole we call earth) we can always strive to live our lives evermore in accordance with **The Golden Rule**...that great commandment of **the caring and careful heart and the generous hand** (that runs through all religions) which reminds us to always “**do unto others as we would have them do unto us.**” Yes...it is a vast, and subtle (and yes, sometimes nearly impossible task) to (in every nuances human situation) figure out precisely how best to live “The Golden Rule.” But our great task as religious persons – as Unitarian Universalists – is to never stop trying to open our hearts and our hands to human life around us...living with ever greater measures of compassion and care, because of our keen awareness of our **INDISSOLUABLE BELONGING TO ONE ANOTHER AS HUMAN BEINGS**. There are other commandments (which I will be exploring this year) which can help us live lives of dignity and nobility, but “doing unto others as we would have them do unto us” is the greatest of them all.

Amen.