September 23, 2018
Matthew 7:7-12
Redefining Gratitude

Rev. Kerry Smith
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Matthew 7:7-12 New Revised Standard Version

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 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? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

 Do to others as you would have them do to you. That is the Golden Rule. Treat others the way that you want to be treated. It is something that we learned at an early age and it is an idea that has been found in writings from 2000 B.C. It is found in nearly every religion and ethical tradition. Writer Karen Armstrong says the Golden Rule “is the best idea humanity has ever had, and it can serve as the unifying ethical insight of compassion.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

All week I have been thinking about the Golden Rule, and it is amazing how when I am thinking about something that God has placed on my heart, I always have an experience that helps me live it out. So, Thursday my son Everett and I were walking to his school and Everett noticed that someone had not picked up a present that their dog had left. We didn’t pick it up and kept walking and I kept thinking, “do to others as you would have them do to you.” I thought about how I was willing to pick up my own dog’s poop but it grossed me out to pick up an unknown dog’s poop. After I dropped Everett off at school, I walked by the house and picked up the poop because I would want someone to do that if they found some on my front lawn. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Do you remember the great classic movie, *The Karate Kid*? Daniel wants to learn karate so he asks Mr. Miyagi to teach him. Mr. Miyagi wants to know why he wants to learn. Daniel admits that it is to seek revenge and Mr. Miyagi says, “If you wish to learn the art of karate to seek revenge, you will then be digging two graves, one for your enemy and one for yourself.”

 I remember the first day that I realized that someone had unfriended me on Facebook. I was feeling a bit out of touch with someone, so I searched for them and they weren’t my friend anymore! I was so mad at them, and I felt so hurt. There are some days where I want to be grateful, but I have no thanks. I read about all of the plastic in the oceans or listen to the story of a refugee fleeing violence. Things seem hopeless. Do you ever feel that way?

Wednesday I stood with my United Methodist pastor friends from the African-American Clergy Fellowship and the Black Methodists for Church Renewal in response to the killing of Botham Jean. We were asking for justice to be served. I had other things to do on Wednesday morning, but my black clergy brothers and sisters asked their clergy brothers and sisters to stand with them. They asked for my voice to join theirs. I couldn’t say no. They named the press conference United Methodists of all colors walking for justice.

One of my friends, an Associate Pastor from Lovers Lane UMC, Rev. Reagan Gilliand shared these words at the press conference, “You know what word I am tired of hearing? But. I am so tired of people saying things like, BUT he was walking in the wrong neighborhood. BUT he was walking with a hoodie on. BUT he reached in his pocket. But he used to... But one time he... But did you know that... But did you hear that... We use “but” in the most offensive way, because in the face of clear injustice, we try to use “but” to justify our apathy. We tell ourselves we don’t have to speak up, that it’s just too complicated, that we don’t have a responsibility because of “but.” The word “but” makes us feel good about ourselves and our privilege and our apathy and let’s us sleep through the night safe in our own homes without one worry. We use “but” as an excuse to get out of the call to justice that God has been so crystal clear about. I would march for justice, but ... I would write my representatives, but I would speak up more, but... But... but... but... God, we need to learn to use a period. We need to learn to simply say, “Injustice is here.” PERIOD. “A black man was killed unjustly.” PERIOD. “Our systems are in need of repair.” PERIOD. No if’s, and’s or but’s... Because this is about justice. For Botham Jean, for black lives, for good. PERIOD.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. We can treat people as we want to be treated because there is enough to go around. I recently read Diana Butler Bass’ book, *Grateful*. She talks about this tendency that we have to hold on to our gratitude. We keep it private because we are afraid that it is finite, it is limited. We forget the Golden Rule. The problem is that individual gratefulness does not make much difference in our larger common life. Change the world gratitude does.

Change the world gratitude is treating one another with compassion. All of us receive infinitely more than we give, and that gratitude is what enriches life. I am not talking about material possessions, but the good gifts of nature and neighbor.[[3]](#footnote-3) My next door neighbor when I was growing up in Houston was Mr. Stroebel. Mr. Stroebel was kind. He had an extra key to my house so when I couldn’t find mine, he would come to my rescue. I am grateful that he was always there, and he usually had candy too.

 There is a transformative power of giving thanks. Gratitude can guide us to a way of healing and compassion. Everything we need is here, with us. We have music and breath and light and air and friendship and love and water and soil and flowers and life. My response to those gifts is to choose a life of caring for others. Sometimes we can feel unconnected in our world. Have you heard of Next Door? It is a website or an app of people that live in a neighborhood together. If you need affirmation that we have more in common with one another than we have differences, check out Next Door when someone has lost their dog. People whose names you never knew care about that lost dog. Everyone in the neighborhood has the shared emotional experience of loving a dog, and it shows how connected we all are. Gratitude is about connection. We feel it when someone does something for us. We discover that we can not meet our own needs and we need one another.

We want to pay attention to good things but gratitude is more. It is when we embrace the gift that in the multibillion year history of the universe each one of us has been born, can love, grows in awareness, and has a story. Life is the gift.[[4]](#footnote-4) I am, you are, we all are. What we feel when we contemplate that, that feeling is gratitude.[[5]](#footnote-5) When it comes to gratitude, me always leads to we because gratitude is about relationships. Gratitude is about being with one another, in life together.

If we are grateful, we enjoy the differences between people, and we are respectful to everybody. If we’re grateful, we act out of a sense of enough and not of a sense of scarcity, and we are willing to share.[[6]](#footnote-6) I am grateful because we are all becoming aware of how we can change the world. We have to rethink gratitude because the Golden Rule teaches us it isn’t about who is better or who has more. No one is on top. No one is wealthier or smarter. There is only you and others.

There is an infinite circle of gratitude and the only debt we have is to love others. Gratitude is defiance. It is the defiance of kindness in the face of anger, connection in the face of division, and hope in the face of fear.[[7]](#footnote-7) Gratitude opens our eyes to see that every life is graced: the lives of the poor, the castoffs, the sick, the jailed, the exiles, the abused, and the forgotten.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Golden Rule is about doing for others, not because of what we might get in return, but because it is the right thing to do. It is about saying yes.

How can we say yes today? How can we stand in solidarity with those who are hurting? How can we extend our table so that we get to hear the story of someone else? How can we listen? How can God use us today to change our world? I give God thanks that God does. We just have to say yes. All things are possible to those who say yes. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Bass, Diana Butler. Grounded. P.200. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://ntcumc.org/news/diverse-group-of-clergy-laity-rally-for-botham-jean [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. xx. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful, p. 133. Quoting David Steindl-Rast [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)