

## **Sermon for May 2, 2010** **The Rev John A. Baldwin**

A priest and a scientist were sharing a compartment on a train one afternoon. As they were chatting away, the scientist commented, "Although I am a scientist, indeed an astronomer, I have great respect for religion. It's a good thing to have, but I think it can all be summed up very nicely in the Golden Rule. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.""

The priest thought about this for a moment and then said. "That is very interesting. Although I am a priest by vocation, I have always been interested in astronomy. I think the whole matter of astronomy can be summed up by saying, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

The priest's reply was certainly sarcastic. By it he implied that the scientist's statement was absurd. Just as there is much more to astronomy than one twinkling star – galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, nebulae, black holes & pulsars - so too there is much more to religion than the Golden Rule.

Although we may laugh at the priest's putdown of the scientist's view of religion, the scientist's comment is a good summary of what many think religion is all about.....being good and acting decently towards one another.  
Nothing wrong with that!

The Golden Rule is the one element that binds the major religions of the world together. In one form or another, it may be found in Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, and it is even cited by atheists and agnostics as a good moral principle. The Golden Rule is not uniquely Christian, nor may it rightly be called "Religious". It says nothing about the God who has revealed himself in history through Jesus Christ (as Christians believe); through Mohammed (as Muslims believe), or through Moses and the prophets (as Jews, Christians and Muslims all believe). Rather, the Golden Rule is a universal, ethical good, appropriate for Christians and non-Christians alike.

But if we reduce the teaching and ministry of Jesus to a simple rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." and call this the essence of Christianity, then we have missed the deeper core...the essential meaning of our Lord's life and death. If the Golden Rule was the sum total of the Christian faith, it would not do justice to the sacrificial, self-giving love of Jesus on the cross. It would be far too narrow a view of Jesus' teaching to be of much assistance in addressing social injustice and oppression, life and death, evil and virtue. The Christian faith is not just a simple moral system for living. It is much, much more.

When we read and reflect on the Gospels, it seems evident that the ethical teachings of Jesus are not easily simplified, nor are they easily attainable. Consider this: When Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother, thinking that 7 times was surely more than should be expected of anyone, Jesus confounded him by saying, "Not 7,

but 70 times 7.” Or consider the rich young man who had observed the commandments all of his life, yet was asked to do one thing more...to give all of his wealth to the poor. Or again, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus urges his disciples to pray for those who abuse them, to turn the other cheek and to walk the extra mile.

Jesus held up ideals that always seem a step beyond what people consider reasonable. He encouraged his disciples to move into deeper levels of forgiveness and compassion than they thought possible. If for example, Jesus had said to Peter, “You’re right, forgiving 7 times is more than generous, then he would have given Peter permission to feel righteously angry at the 8<sup>th</sup> offence.

In posing ideals to aim at, such as turning the extra cheek and walking the extra mile, Jesus was not so much replacing one set of do’s and don’ts with a more stringent set of guidelines, as he was challenging the artificial limits we often set on our love and forgiveness, and encouraging us to push the boundaries further out.

There are lots of good reasons that would lead us, like Peter, to set limits on our love and forgiveness. We are fearful of being abused or taken advantage of. Our trust has been damaged. We are wounded and hurting inside.

Like Peter, many of us are thirsty for unambiguous guidelines for our behavior and that of others...or at the least, reasonable limits. But the abundant life Jesus calls us to live is filled with complexities. The people we encounter are often not easy to love or like. The moral issues that challenge us may have equally compelling arguments for and against them. We often need to make tough decisions about the right thing to do, or the best way to act and respond to others, without clarity and certainty.

Jesus doesn’t want us to approach life with our noses in rule books, but rather creatively and boldly as free moral agents. If we make errors of judgment, Jesus wants us to err on the side of too much generosity and forgiveness, not too little. Jesus takes us a lot further down the road towards the lavish and extravagant love of God than does the Golden Rule.

What is uniquely Christian is the Great Commandment, Jesus’ summary of the Law. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself.”

This takes us well beyond what is reasonable and acceptable, because if we are loving God with our whole being and your neighbors as ourselves, we are not keeping scorecards of rights and wrongs, and we are not setting limits as to how much love and forgiveness we will expend. Instead we are constantly asking ourselves, “What is the most loving thing to do?” ...and then doing it as courageously as possible.