Living the Golden Rule
A Sermon by the Rev. James R. Bridges
UU Fellowship of the Poconos
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The question of how we relate to one another has always been intriguing to me. In part, this may come from attending Sunday School classes at an early age. I know it may sound odd, but that is the truth.

As a young child, I attended Sunday School every Sunday of the year. I was taught various lessons, I suppose, but if truth be told, I don’t remember much of those days. Some things I do remember, however, and I think many of those “things” about Christianity and the Bible that I remember came from Sunday School. For example, I know about Jacob and his magnificent coat. I know about Jonah and the whale. I have heard of Abraham and Isaac, as well as about Noah and the Ark. I have heard about Moses being found in a river bed, raised in the palace of the Pharaoh, his leading his people out of Egypt in the Exodus, and his receiving of the Ten Commandments. So I did learn and retain children stories in Sunday School.

Another thing I learned were various Biblical verses or sayings. For example, I can remember memorizing the Ten Commandments, although I can no longer recite them. I can also recall memorizing the words to John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” And I also learned the Golden Rule – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That last rule was reinforced a number of times in Sunday School. I believe some of these latter lessons in Sunday School triggered my interest in human behavior and in doing good works.

Some more personal history: As a young child, I attended Sunday School classes at an Evangelical & Reformed Church. Back in 1957, the E&R’s merged with the Congregationalists, forming the United Church of Christ. Many of you may remember that we Unitarians came out of the Congregationalists back in the late 1700’s and early 1800’s. The E&R church was basically middle road to liberal theologically, as the UCC today is liberal Protestant.

The second religious influence on my life, however, was the Mennonite church of my grandmother and mother, along with a large extended family living in a rural
community. Now this is where church history gets interesting. The Mennonites, who are often thought to be conservative, were part of the left wing, or radicals, of the Protestant Reformation. Indeed, in the 1500’s, Menno Simons, for whom the Mennonites are named, led his band of followers out of Germany to the Netherlands, which was more religiously tolerant. What is less well known is that within his band of followers were Unitarian thinkers. He ultimately threw them out, for they were too radical for him, but as early as the mid-1500’s, the Mennonites and the Unitarians shared a belief that deeds were far more important than creeds. While neither may have argued that humankind is saved solely by its actions and not by its creeds or beliefs, they came awfully close to it.

My point here is that the Mennonites emphasized one’s deeds….how one lived the Christian life. That is why you have seen some Mennonites and Amish withdrawing from contemporary society, living apart, in their own communities. But I digress.

The topic of how we relate to each other initially led me to want to enter the ministry after college, with thoughts of becoming a missionary overseas. Faced with the civil rights movement and the peace movement, I pursued working for peace and justice in the late 1960’s. From that vantage point, once exhausted, I became interested in psychology as a way of helping other people and hopefully transforming how people related to each other. And that, gradually led me back to the ministry.

This desire to improve one’s relationship with others can be a burden, on myself, and also on those around me. I can recall Sally Freedman remarking one Sunday that I was always trying to get us to improve. She was right. I do try to get people to improve, including myself. Not that we are not good enough just as we are, because most of us are good enough. But that doesn’t mean that we still can’t improve and try to be the best that we can be.

When in high school, one of the books that I read was “In His Steps,” written by Charles Sheldon in 1896. It is from this short novel that the question “What would Jesus do?” came. The book also served to encourage me in trying to live an ethical Christian life. That concern has never left me, even though my theology did fall apart in my college days.

To me, the ethical and moral teachings of Jesus, although personal, were paramount to Christianity. This statement may seem odd coming from a Unitarian Universalist today, but consider this quotation from the Rev. Edward Frost, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Atlanta, “It was not the ethical and moral
teaching of Jesus that drove Unitarians and Universalists to the edge of the theological spectrum. It was the magic, miracle and mysticism in which the church buried his humanity after his death.” It was that magic and miracle which the rational Unitarians rejected. Both the Universalists and the Unitarians regarded him as a great teacher, perhaps the greatest, at least on a personal level.

And that brings us back to the Golden Rule, given in Matthew 7, vs. 12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets.”

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It does make a lot of sense. You start off by serving as the role model for positive behavior. You set the pace. In doing so, you act ethically and responsibly as a person. One can gain a sense of piety and of righteousness. But, as those of you who may have already tried to follow the rule, it is difficult to do so and even more so to maintain.

But can you imagine what it would be like to live in a community where it was always followed? I think it would be very affirming.

Indeed, our own Unitarian Universalist Principles refer to the “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” Is this not the Golden Rule?

Jesus was not the first person, nor the last person, to formulate a rule like this. Indeed, I’m sure many of you have seen a series of quotations from other religions – each representing something similar to the Golden Rule. Most of these sayings, however, are not formulated in the positive – like Jesus did. Instead, they read in the negative, such as this saying from Confucianism: “Do not do to others what you would not like yourself.” Or from Buddhism: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” As such, sometimes they have been referred to as the Silver Rules.

But does following the Golden Rule really result in the best type of society? It certainly works on a personal, spiritual level for me. But even so, is it the best ethic for all of society? That question made me do some research.

A number of years ago, Dr. Carl Sagan wrote an article entitled “The Rules of the Game.” It appeared in a book of his called Billions and Billions (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1997). Sagan identified the following rules:

Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
Silver Rule: Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.

Brass Rule: Do unto others as they do unto you. (Fatal flaw – it results in unending vendettas.)

Iron Rule: Do unto others as you like, before they do it unto you. (The secret maxim of many, including the powerful.)

Tin Rule: Suck up to those above you, and abuse those below. (The motto of bullies.)

Nepotism Rule: Give precedence in all things to close relatives, and do as you like to others. (In my experience, often the rule of the clan and tribe; prevalent in the Middle East in some societies.)

Tit-for-tat rule: Cooperate with others first, then do unto them as they do unto you.

Sagan and others used game theory to test each of the above rules of operating during a game. He set the stage like this: “Imagine that you and a friend are arrested for committing a serious crime. For the purposes of the game, it doesn’t matter whether either, neither, or both of you did it. What matters is that the police say they think you did. Before the two of you have any chance to compare stories or plan strategy, you are taken to separate interrogation cells. There, oblivious of your Miranda rights . . ., they try to make you confess. They tell you, as police sometimes do, that your friend has confessed and implicated you. The police might be telling the truth. Or they might be lying. You’re permitted only to plead innocent or guilty. If you’re willing to say anything, what’s your best tack to minimize punishment?”

In the article, he analyzed the possible outcomes, and then described a round-robin computer tournament at the University of Michigan which tested the outcome over
multiple trials. Who at the end wins, meaning, comes out with the best result for themselves?

Both the Golden Rule and the Iron Rule always lost! They consistently came in last.

The most effective strategy in many such tournaments was the tit-for-tat rule. Cooperate initially, and in each subsequent round, do what your opponent did in the last one. You punish defections, but once your opponent cooperates, you let bygones be bygones and begin cooperating with your opponent.

What we are really talking about is starting off by following the golden rule, but reacting punitively immediately when violations of the Golden Rule occur. Once the other person has returned to following the Golden Rule, you forgive immediately, reconcile, and go back to following the Golden Rule yourself. It has the best outcome for both parties over the long term.

Conclusion: The Golden Rule is a viable strategy for living one’s life, provided you are also willing to quickly punish transgressors with a tit-for-tat response. Such an approach allows for the development of a personal ethic based upon the Golden Rule – one which also experimentally resulted in the best outcomes over time.

In real life – it might be difficult to always mete out appropriate punishment for various offenses. Nonetheless, I do believe it does make sense to try to follow the Golden Rule, but not to the point of foolishness. One must not be blind and leave oneself open to continually being the victim. Start off acting with empathy and care for the other, but when crossed, respond appropriately and immediately, but then go back to following the Golden Rule as soon as other individual does. And the nice thing is from my point of view – is that if everyone else is following the Golden Rule, it will continue to be followed, making for the best of all possible worlds in social interaction.

I thank you for your listening, and I invite you, if you are not already doing so, to try to follow the golden rule over the next few weeks. Do unto others as you would have them
do unto you. See how it feels, and how it works. I also will welcome your comments after we have our morning’s offering.

And here too, the Golden Rule might be followed – give as generously as you wish your neighbor might give to your congregation – for it is only through your gifts that we survive.