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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Z6
7 Epiphany (Year C) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
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Sunday 24 February 2019

Genesis 45:3-11, 15
Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42
1 Cor. 15:35-38, 42-
Luke 6:27-38

Why the Golden Rule Is Wrong

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you" (Lk. 6).

1. What is your inner narrative? How do you talk to yourself about the world? Many people think that religion is primarily about belief. I think it is how we respond to God. It is how we take responsibility for the stories that shape our life.

One hundred and ten years ago the English novelist E.M. Forster (1879-1970) wrote a short story called "The Machine Stops."¹ It takes place in a future when many human beings live underground in hexagonal chambers. With the press of a button a warm bathtub or a gourmet meal will come up through the floor.

"The Machine" meets each person's physical and spiritual needs. It plays enchanting music and entertaining videos. It connects you with thousands of friends who you don't really know. It is basically a prediction of today's Internet. In the story a son wants to meet with his mother in person and she cannot understand why he would want to bother when they can speak through video-conferencing technology. In short it is about San Francisco in 2019 as zombies like you and me roam the streets more connected to our cell phones than anything real.

In contrast to this I think of another image. At my old church we had summer BBQ potlucks on Wednesday nights for everyone in the neighborhood. Parents didn't have to think about what they would cook that night. The children would play in the bouncy house. Older people living alone could see friends. We had a basket for donations. Some people put in a few twenty dollar bills and others nothing. Some people brought elaborate side dishes and others just a bag of potato chips. No one was keeping count.

I noticed that if two people in the church were having a disagreement it would often get worked out over those plastic picnic tables with the red and white tablecloths. We were all really together in those times.

The reason I am sharing these two pictures is that so often I hear people talk about the Bible as if it were one of those San Francisco street parking signs. You know the ones that say "No Parking 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. First and Third Wednesday of the month - Street

Cleaning." It's clear that offending cars will get a ticket but it doesn't give you any idea of what good driving is.

So many people seem to regard the Bible as if it is simply a list of "thou shalt not's" when really Jesus does so much more.² He gives us a picture that will change the story of who we are so profoundly that it will lead to a different kind of life.

The "thou shalt not" understanding of the Bible leads to dangerous mistakes including interpretations that are exactly the opposite of what Jesus means. This is the case with the most frequently quoted Christian ethic, what people call "the Golden Rule." Yes you heard me correctly. One of the few things people know about Christianity, that we should "do unto others as we would have them do unto us," is wrong.

2. Today we have the second half of Jesus' most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Plain. Last week Jesus talked about how the ones we think of as unfortunate: the poor, hungry and sorrowful are blessed. It is easier for them to recognize their dependence on God and this gives them an invisible spiritual power.

This morning Jesus begins. "I say to you that listen." He warns that understanding these simple sentences requires special attention. He goes on to say, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you" (Lk. 6). The word we translate as bless in Greek is eulogeite. That's related to our word eulogy, which we use for the words family-members and close friends speak at funerals about the deceased. In your heart today take a few minutes to "eulogize" someone who curses you.

Jesus goes on with some of the most vivid expressions in the Bible. "If someone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other one also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt." I warned you earlier about the dangers of approaching this in a literalistic, "thou shalt not" sort of way. Jesus does not want us to stay in abusive relationships. Jesus does not encourage us to put ourselves in danger.

Jesus is using hyperbole, exaggerated language to paint a picture that is hard for us to understand. In biblical times there were only two articles of clothing. A modern translation would be, "If someone takes your jacket on the subway, give them your underwear too!"

This brings us to the Golden Rule which we hear so often quoted out of context. Jesus says, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." We understand this as a kind of exchange. I treat you well so that you will do the same to me. But Jesus means

something much more radical. In effect he's breaking the picture of the world that suggest this will lead to happiness.

He says, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you." He says the same thing about lending to people who could pay you back, or doing good to someone who might one day do you a favor. Each time he repeats "What credit is that to you." But the word is not "credit" it is the Greek word "xaris," or grace.

Grace is the gift we receive that we did not deserve. It is the abundant love lying at the heart of all existence. God, "is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." But again the Greek word is *acharistous* – the un-gracious and *pornērous* (the wicked which is the root for our word pornography). The Golden Rule, the *quid pro quo* world, in which I give you something so that I might get something – that is the opposite of grace. It is not how God gives and not how we should either.

3. Two monks were traveling together when a beautiful young woman asked them for help in crossing the river. Without speaking the older monk picked her up and carried her to the other side. The younger monk couldn't believe that his colleague had broken his vows by touching a woman. As they walked together he kept thinking about how he needed to confront the older man.

Finally, several hours later the younger one said, "As monks we have sworn not to touch a woman and yet you carried her across the water." The older monk replied, "Brother, I put down that woman hours ago why are you still carrying her?" It is not easy to set down that story about helping only those who might help us. We need to do it again and again.

One thing I love about Grace Cathedral is our stories. In our congregation a man named David has dedicated himself to understanding what the word "grace" means in the secular world and in church. We met this week to talk about it. He points out that grace is everywhere here and wondered if that was the case in other churches. At baptism we say that God, "by water and the Holy Spirit" has raised us to, "the new life of grace." At the end of the communion service we thank God for, "graciously accepted us as living members of your Son."³

The apostle Paul says that through Christ grace inhabits our body (1 Cor. 15). Forgiveness is a kind of grace. The definition of forgiveness is the ability to leave the past in the past. Joseph does this. When he meets his brothers, who sold him into slavery, he forgives them. With God's grace he can even say that the worst, most damaging events in his life led to good.

Grace is not just about church. It lies at the heart of our existence. Larry Brilliant will be our forum guest next month. As a young doctor in India he worked on the team that eradicated smallpox. He writes about grace too. At a crucial moment he faced a terrible decision. His wife had discovered God at Neem Karoli Baba's ashram in India and although he tried to fit in he couldn't bring himself to believe.

He spent a day by himself in a boat on a lake pleading with God for a sign. After being met with just silence he told his wife that he would leave the next day. When he went to say goodbye, his wife's guru playfully asked him where he had been the previous day. He said, "were you at the movies, at the library... or were you at the *lake*? Did you ask God for something?"

When Larry Brilliant looked up suddenly his teacher seemed as if he were on fire. He writes, "Light seemed to pour out of him into me and I felt like I was being filled with love upon love... That moment in which I found myself awash in a tsunami of love for every being in creation became the touchstone by which I measured every future experience... That moment of pure love has driven everything in my life... It made me act unpredictably, I was governed by love."⁴

On the last page of his book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau writes, "Only that day dawns to which we are awake."⁵ This reminds me to constantly ask myself, "how can I wake up to grace, to love, to what is in front of me."

What is your inner narrative? In this cellphone world does your life more often look like a scene from "The Machine Stops," or a mid-summer church potluck? Jesus does not give us a severe "thou shalt not" form of religion. For him love is not a strategy for getting ahead because that way of living turns all love into self-love.

So leave behind the calculations of "Golden Rules." If someone takes your coat give them your underwear. And let your life be filled with joy and playfulness, governed by the wild, exuberant love of Jesus.

¹ E.M. Forster, "The Machine Stops," *The Eternal Moment and Other Stories* (NY: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1928). See also, Oliver Sacks, "The Machine Stops: The Neurologist on Steam Engines, Smart Phones and, Fearing the Future," *The New Yorker*, 11 February 2019.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/02/11/the-machine-stops>.

² This idea of a "thou shalt not" picture of Christianity was inspired by Matthew and Liz Boulton, "Grace in Action: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany Week 7, SALT, 19 February 2019.

<http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/2/19/grace-in-action-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-7>

³ *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church*, 1979, pages 308 and 365.

⁴ Larry Brilliant, *Sometimes Brilliant: The Impossible Adventure of a Spiritual Seeker and Visionary Physician Who Helped Conquer the Worst Disease in History* (NY: HarperOne, 2016) 113.

⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *The Illustrated Walden* ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) 333.