

## The Golden Ground Rule

As many of you know, I am a child of Public Television. I grew up watching *Zoom*, *Electric Company*, *Mr. Rogers*, and of course, *Sesame Street*. I came across a recent episode of *CBS Sunday Morning* that ran a story about *Sesame Street*'s turning 50 this year. The show featured new characters and old favorites. My heart did a little flutter when Snuffleupagus came on the screen. I sang the theme song out loud, even though I couldn't quite keep up with the newly jazzed up version. And then the reporter interviewed Elmo and Grover. They had been talking about the importance of teaching children to be kind. Red furry Elmo said, "Elmo thinks treating people the way you would like to be treated is very important." Grover responded, "Yeah. That's deep. I like that. I'll write that one down...as soon as I learn to write."<sup>1</sup> Fortunately for Grover and for us, someone has already written it down. Many times over, throughout the centuries this Golden Rule—as it has come to be known—has been written and re-written and re-written again. Maybe because it is deep, as Grover says, or maybe because it strikes something deep within us, something we long for in ourselves and others, or maybe because it is something humanity has struggled with since the dawn of time.

This morning's text takes us to the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As you may recall, on the heels of his time of testing in the desert, Matthew tells us that Jesus begins his ministry by calling his first disciples and healing the multitudes. Understandably, crowds start to follow this charismatic stranger with a gift for making people whole. Jesus then heads up a mountain, draws his disciples around him, and begins to teach and preach. The teaching, found in chapters 5, 6, and 7 has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount. It is long and rich and full. It incorporates the Beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and the Golden Rule as we heard today. This sermon also includes much more as Matthew relates Jesus' intentions for this community he is creating, or re-creating. Some scholars believe that Matthew's initial hearers are a band of devout Jewish believers who understand Jesus to be the long awaited Messiah. And it has cost them. It seems there has been a rift between these Jesus followers and the synagogue. As one scholar notes, much of the language of this gospel suggests "a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/CBSSundayMorning/videos/elmo-and-grover-on-the-lessons-they-learn-on-sesame-street/1485868104876524/>

strained if not broken relationship between Matthew's intended readers and the synagogue."<sup>2</sup> So the writer of Matthew is offering this fledgling community the words of Jesus, their Messiah and leader who seeks to shape a new community—and ultimately the church—in a very specific way. Interestingly enough, he does not ground this community in revenge on those who have gone another way or on agreeing lockstep with one another but on humility and compassion, on justice and mercy.

In our text for this morning, Jesus begins with an emphasis on humility, on removing one's own huge, log-sized blind spot before even beginning to think about pointing out another's more modest one. There's a concern for avoiding hypocrisy and for not offering what is treasured to those who will trample it. Jesus encourages his followers to ask God for what they need and to trust God to give them good things, rather than getting too cozy with leaders and rulers who do not have the people's best interest at heart.

And then comes that Golden Rule. This is so familiar, too familiar perhaps, which I suspect is why it kept showing up everywhere I turned this past week, even in the mouth of a red furry Muppet monster. But it is more than a nice thought from a children's TV show. One of its first homes is as a part of our sacred scripture, tucked in a series of sermon snippets that can read like a list of strung together proverbs. But if we look and listen closely, we realize that they are not unrelated. The discipline developed by pausing before fishing specks out of another's eye goes hand in hand with a practice of trusting God to give us what is needed. And a posture of humility and trust dovetails with the work of compassion emphasized in the Golden Rule. When these practices are embodied and enacted, the community develops a pattern for how it will be and live and act in the world. And, yes, these words are all well and good embroidered on a tea towel or painted on a barn board, but they are not just little gems to be tucked away or even admired by us in our private worlds. The "you" implied in "Do to others," is plural, "y'all" as I have said many times, "all y'all" to make it crystal clear. In other words, it matters that individual believers live a certain way, but Jesus expects the entire community, the church as a body to treat others with compassion and to teach his followers to do the same "in everything." Yep. Everything. We do not get to pick and choose. It's always about the other. All the time. In everything. At least that what Jesus says.

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<sup>2</sup> Aaron M. Gale, "Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew," *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford, 2017) 10.

Now this can be taken to the extreme. It's not about being a doormat with no concern for self. This verse comes on the heels of the assurance that God will give us what we need, acknowledging that we have needs, too. However, human beings tend to be pretty good about looking out for our own interests, as do human institutions. Yes, there are people who are groomed from early on to accommodate to an extreme, to put themselves last in an unhealthy and unhelpful way, and the church can fall prey to this temptation, too. The church can be tempted to make everyone happy and ruffle no feathers. So this Golden Rule is directed first and foremost at the community, at the church. It is not simply about feeling compassion or sympathy. The church is called to DO to others as we would have done to us. But what does that doing look like?

I think it may look like a church in The Hague. As you may have heard, the Bethel Church recently held services for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to protect the Tamrazyan family from being sent back to Armenia. Dutch law forbids law enforcement from entering a church while a service is being held. The church decided in October to do all that it could to protect this family who arrived in the Netherlands in 2010, fleeing political persecution. So they worshiped during one continuous marathon service for 96 days. The service involved 1000 pastors and priests and thousands of worshipers who gathered in that space to protect a family. Derk Stegeman, one of the pastors who organized the service served as a spokesman throughout the service that continued for 96 days. Pastors of all stripes took shifts day and night, leading those gathered in prayers, songs, and reflections. Some skeptics who were wary of the church being too activist came for worship, met the family and heard their story, and joined in leading the service, too. Stegeman says, "This is just the beginning... I hope it's a new way of being a church — a new way of having an impact on society, a new way of standing up for vulnerable people."<sup>3</sup> If my family were facing deportation after having fled for our lives, I wonder who would look out for me. Would the church rise to the occasion? Would I expect the church to do any less for another? "Do to others," Jesus says.

Pastor Stegeman points to this as something new. Maybe it is a new way of living out this rule, but the rule itself is not new. It is ancient, sacred, and central to who we are. As Grover noticed, it is also deep, and it

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/30/world/europe/netherlands-church-vigil-refugees.html>

runs deep, deep into who we are called to be. Jesus sums up his sermon with a parable, charging the community to be careful about where her foundation lies:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup> The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!<sup>4</sup>

Where is the church's foundation today? For years we could rely on being central to the larger society.

Everyone went to church, or so it seemed. Everyone valued where the church stood and what the church had to say. That may not be the case anymore, or not in the easy convenient way it once was. But our foundation was never dependent on the larger culture, or at least it was never intended to rest there. It was never about building on the shifting sand of what is safe or popular or convenient. Instead our deep, solid foundation was and still is found in the Word of God, the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, the same one who tells us, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you." This Golden Rule is our ground rule and our grounding rule, given to us by the One who is our foundation, the One in whom our faithful God gives us a solid place to stand and live and serve in his name.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:24-29, NRSV