

“The Broken Rule”

Luke 6:20-31

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“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

~Luke 6:31

**Thanks be to God for all the faithful who have kept this commandment;
and God have mercy on those who have failed.**

This commandment from Jesus is known to many of us as the “Golden Rule.” This designation has apparently been used in English since the 18th Century, and, growing up, many of us probably had it posted on the walls of our classrooms at school and at church.¹ It’s posted in at least one of our children’s Sunday school rooms here. It’s so well-known that I’m sure some don’t even know that it comes from the Bible. And I’m afraid many people have forgotten about it altogether, as if it were something only kids needed to know and obey. **But if this commandment is lost in the adult world, it’s likely to be missing in the lives of our children and teens.**

In recent months, we have been saturated with news of teen suicides resulting from “bullying.” **Thus far it has resulted in this litany: 15-year-old Billy Lucas, 13-year-old Asher Brown, 18-year-old Tyler Clementi, 13-year-old Seth Walsh, 19-year-old Raymond Chase.** Now some of us may think to ourselves, “I remember being bullied, and I turned out okay. It’s something every kid goes through at some point. You tough it out and you’re a stronger person in the end.” In preparing this sermon, I began to remember being bullied in elementary school, mostly because I was little (To this day, I’m still “Little Jason Alspaugh” to some). On separate occasions, I was punched in the gut, spit on, chased and nearly thrown into a dumpster. One of my solutions was to befriend some of the bigger kids who were not bullies. They became my “body guards.” **This is what “bullying” is: little vs. big; weak vs. strong.**

Yet if we consider a formal definition of “bullying” we might begin to understand that it’s not a rite of passage and a problem for children and teens to solve, but is in fact an adult problem with far-reaching consequences. According to Ken Rigby, **“bullying is repeated oppression, psychological or physical, of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons.”**² Bullying doesn’t sound so childish now, does it? It actually sounds to me a lot more like a weapon of sexism, anti-Semitism, racism and homophobia. **Bullying is systemic violence in its adolescence, and left unchecked it will grow up into something tragic and “normal.”**

I was glad to see that Roy Medley, the General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches USA, *attempted* to address the issue of bullying in his most recent letter posted on the ABCUSA website (www.abc-usa.org). In that letter he laments “the tragic suicide of 19-year-old Rutgers student, Tyler Clementi” and “the continuing coverage of the Phelps family picketing the funerals of those killed in Afghanistan and Iraq.” He notes:

¹ Bruce Metzger, writing in “The Designation ‘Golden Rule,’” found it used in 1885 by William Dean Howells in his novel “The Rise of Silas Lapham”: “In our dealings with each other, we should be guided by the golden rule.” And in 1785, Edward Gibbons remarked that a certain person “violated the golden rule of doing as he would be done by.” (via Lex Woodbury, Fuller Theological)

² Cited in Ronald H. Cram’s study, “Memories by Christian Adults of Childhood Bullying Experiences: Implications for Adult Religious Self-Understanding,” *Religious Education* 96 no. 3 (2001): 327.

In 1988, the General Board of ABCUSA “...ask[ed] American Baptists to pray and work for an age of peace in which no one will be violently assaulted or threatened because of ethnic origin, race, religion, or sexual orientation.” And it further “...urg[ed] American Baptists in collaboration with all persons committed to freedom and justice to speak out for an end to hate crimes perpetrated by persons in our society who believe they can violently act out their prejudices.”

Then he goes on to cite Matthew’s version of the Golden Rule (Mt. 7:12), adding:

The Christian message is that every individual possesses invaluable worth in God’s eyes [...] Jesus’ teaching, which requires us to not merely refrain from treating someone ‘anyway bad,’ [sic] holds us to an even higher standard of love that compels us to actively do good.”

In many ways, Dr. Medley is right. However, I said that he “attempted” to address this issue, because ultimately he failed to acknowledge the basis for Tyler Clementi’s suicide and the Phelps family’s picketing of military funerals—i.e., fear and hatred, homophobic and anti-gay sentiments.

Now I suspect that one of the main reasons Dr. Medley did not address this issue more explicitly is because he *can not*; because in the years *since 1988 the General Board of ABCUSA has done nothing that would give it the moral authority to credibly speak out against this kind of fear and hatred*. In fact, while there have been clarion calls for “dialogue” the General Board has continued to take actions that prevent *genuine* dialogue. They have adopted policy statements and resolutions and *then* called for dialogue.³ As recently as 2005, the General Board adopted a revised Identity Statement, and the primary revision was the inclusion of the statement, “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Biblical teaching.”⁴ And since then, silence. And while we remain silent, gay teens and young adults suffer in their own silence; and some commit suicide.

By making such statements and then remaining silent, we become accessories to anti-gay bullying. In a recent article in *Religion Dispatches*, Cody Sanders wrote:

I find it difficult to believe that even those among us with a vibrant imagination can muster the creative energy to picture a reality in which anti-gay violence and bullying exist *without* the anti-gay religious messages that support them [...] These messages come in many forms, degrees of virulence, and volumes of expression. The most insidious forms, however, are not those from groups like Westboro Baptist Church [...] More difficult to address are the myriad ways in which everyday churches that do a lot of good in the world also perpetuate theologies that under-gird and legitimate instrumental violence.⁵

Theologies and biblical interpretations that belie the fact “every individual possesses invaluable worth in God’s eyes” have aided the oppression of women, Jews, African Americans, as well as LGBT people (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people). Decades ago, Howard Thurman wrote, “Most of the accepted social behavior-patterns assume segregation to be normal—if normal, then correct; if correct, then moral; if moral, then religious. Religion is thus made a defender and guarantor of the presumptions.”⁶ History has already shown us that one of the tragic consequences of making prejudices socially acceptable is that it provides justification for violence against certain groups of people (e.g., the Jewish Holocaust).

³ To read the history of actions go to <http://www.abc-usa.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=iRGq66AgLAU%3d&tabid=199>

⁴ To read the Identity Statement go to <http://www.abc-usa.org/WhoWeAre/Identity/IdentityStatement/tabid/78/Default.aspx>

⁵ Cody J. Sanders is a Baptist minister and Ph.D. student in Pastoral Theology and Counseling at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, TX. Cody was a Fellow in the inaugural class of the Human Rights Campaign Summer Institute for Religious and Theological Study and is a participant in the *Beyond Apologetics* symposium on sexual identity, pastoral theology, and pastoral practice. His article, “Why Anti-gay Bullying is a Theological Issue,” which I reference several times can be found at: http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/sexandgender/3479/why_anti-gay_bullying_is_a_theological_issue/

⁶ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 43.

Subsequently, there is what Thurman called “the perpetual threat of violence everywhere”; and not just any kind of violence, but “violence that is devoid of the element of contest,” “one-sided violence.”⁷ **This is the grown-up-version of bullying.** I believe it’s the kind of violence Jesus was referring to when he said, “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man” (Lk. 6:22). And, according to Sanders, this kind of violence is the deeper reason for the recent teen suicides:

When LGBT people resort to suicide, they are responding to far more than the pain of a few individual insults or humiliating occurrences. When LGBT people commit suicide it is an extreme act of resistance to an oppressive and unjust reality in which every LGBT person is always and everywhere at risk of becoming the target of violence solely because of sexual orientation or gender identity. They are acts of resistance to a perceived reality in which a lifetime of violence and abuse seems utterly unavoidable.

One of the more courageous efforts to counter this “perceived reality” and give hope to gay teens who may be contemplating suicide is the “It Gets Better Project” started by writer/media pundit Dan Savage.⁸ It’s a YouTube-video-based project that shares “the stories of people overcoming bullying and finding happiness.” The constant message is simply “It Gets Better.” While there is evidence that this message is true, **it’s important for us to be realistic and remind one another that bullying will not end on its own, in due time.**

In his *Letter From Birmingham City Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote on “the myth of time,” saying:

It is the strange irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through tireless efforts and persistent work of men [and women] willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.⁹

In another article, Sanders said that he “urged churches that rest comfortably in a tacitly welcoming or pseudo-affirming position to come out and publicly proclaim their places of worship as truly welcoming and affirming sanctuaries for people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.” In effect, Sanders was speaking to churches that were “in the closet.” Such churches generally follow the “Silver Rule,” which is the negative formulation of the Golden Rule—i.e., “What you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others.” The underlying principle of the Silver Rule is essentially “do no harm”; however, John Topel notes that the Silver Rule “neither commands nor recommends any positive action.”¹⁰ In effect, one doesn’t have to say or do anything; just don’t do anything bad. **Those who do not wish to disturb the status quo follow the Silver Rule.**

In contrast (according to Topel) the powerful underlying principle of the Golden Rule is that “one ought to do that which benefits”; and, therefore, it “commands all positive, beneficial, actions.” Topel cites three types of actions governed by the Golden Rule: “(a) one ought to prevent evil or harm [...] (b) one ought to remove the cause of evil or harm [...] (c) one ought to do the good positively; on the level of basic duty, by

⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁸ Read more about the It Gets Better Project at www.itgetsbetterproject.com.

⁹ Contained in Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 296.

¹⁰ John Topel, S.J., “The Tarnished Golden Rule (Luke 6:31): The Inescapable Radicalness of Christian Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 59 (1998): 479. I credit Topel for introducing me to this concept of the Silver Rule.

acting justly, and the level of heroic charity, by forgiving the same offense for the seventh time, or even ‘laying down one’s life’ for the other, even the enemy.”

Adherents to the Golden Rule know that “the time is always ripe to do right,” and so it’s important to be prepared. During the Civil Rights Movement, training for nonviolent direct action involved “sociodramas designed to prepare demonstrators for some of the challenges they could expect to face,” which included practicing the “nonviolent creed”—i.e., “to resist without bitterness; to be cursed and not reply; to be beaten and not hit back.”¹¹ In the same way, if we are to obey Jesus’ commandment, this Golden Rule, we must practice *this* creed: **“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Lk. 6:27-28). Doing all these things, we will be called “blessed” and “children of the Most High” (Lk. 6:35); and may even save a life...**

¹¹ King, *Testament of Hope*, 536.