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We Are the Church: Render to no person evil for evil.

Strengthen anyone fainthearted.

Support anyone weak. Heal anyone afflicted.

Tim Hart-Andersen

Sunday, October 15, 2023

Leviticus 19:9-18; Matthew 7:1-5, 12

The scripture passages for today were selected months ago, when we knew we would be marking the completion, or near completion, of a major capital campaign at Westminster. We could not have known *then* what would happen this week in other parts of the world.

It's a bit jarring, frankly, to juxtapose our celebration with the suffering of so many. But we are the church, and we are made to face and live into the chaos of the world, carrying a message of hope, and so we do that this morning.

The Sermon on the Mount, from which today's gospel reading comes, opens with the Beatitudes, when Jesus says,

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4,5)

This past week we've seen too much mourning among the meek of the earth. Children dying in Israel and Gaza, families grieving the senseless loss of the next generation to wanton violence, first from the terror unleashed by Hamas and now from the destruction in Gaza by Israel.

I had breakfast a few days ago with the interfaith clergy of downtown Minneapolis, including a Jewish rabbi and an Arabic Muslim imam. All of us have been to Israel and Palestine multiple times. No one wanted to talk about solutions or next steps or politics in what we know to be

an extraordinarily complex situation. The room that morning was simply filled with sorrow, with an exhausted sadness at the endless conflict and loss of life, especially among the children.

Render to no person evil for evil. That line from the weekly Charge and Benediction at the end of worship seems particularly apt this week.

Let us all pray for peace and advocate for justice in that part of the world where there is neither.

The Sermon on the Mount starts with the Beatitudes and ends, three chapters later, with the Golden Rule. It's Jesus' closing argument: "In everything," he says, summing up what he has just preached, "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Every major world religion embraces that same uncomplicated approach to human relationships. It's an ethic for all ages, all places, all people. "Do to others what you would want them to do to you." We all remember it, but few of us live it completely. It applies to our most

intimate relationships, and to our life in community and among the nations, as well.

The divisions that paralyze our public life today in America and haunt our culture could use a little Golden Rule sprinkled on them. How can we speak ill of other people and groups and assume the worst of them, when we would hope they not do the same to us?

Jesus doesn't pull the Golden Rule out of thin air. He says that the prophets and the Law gave rise to this rule. He was clear on this point: *show God's love to others and God's love will be shown to you.* That ethic is embedded in the Holiness Code of Leviticus, a set of ethical commandments to God's people:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

“You shall not steal...you shall not lie to one another...you shall not defraud your neighbor...and

you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a worker...I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 19:9, 11, 13)

Those ancient words are reflected in our weekly Charge and Benediction in worship: *Strengthen anyone fainthearted. Support anyone weak. Heal anyone afflicted.*

It's a simple directive for our life together: treat others as you yourself would want to be treated. Could there be a more basic commandment for human community, an ethic not limited to any one religion, but meant for all of us? It is the measure of what is right and good in life. What matters is not what makes us feel self-satisfied or vindicated or avenged, but what contributes to a world that is a little kinder and more just.

Westminster aspires to be a Golden Rule church. We're committed as a congregation and as individuals – because when we go from this place we are, each one of us, the

church in the world – to live in this world in ways that show the love and justice of God. That’s what our Westminster mission statement says. That doesn’t mean we’re perfect. Sometimes we fall short, which is why we include a time of confession each week in worship: we own that we don’t always hit the mark – and we are grateful that God’s grace always gives us another chance – always another chance, as individuals and communities.

For more than a decade Westminster has been working at creating a sustainable future for this congregation. And, speaking personally, I am glad finally to arrive at this Sunday. We’ve wanted to give those who follow us the wherewithal to continue to be a church working for a world whose worth is tested by how the most vulnerable among us are faring. A world where the meek might inherit the earth.

That's essentially the purpose of the church: worship God with all our heart and mind and strength – and then take the goodness of God out into the streets of the city and nations of the world, not as self-righteous victors, but as realistic and humble followers of one who came not to be served but to serve.

We are the church. This is what we do. Whether as individuals or together as a community, we try to live with others as we want them to live with us. Our city and the world need to hear that, to see that, especially this week but only this week, to experience a willingness, among this community and others, to attend to others as we would have them attend to us.

Today we celebrate a milestone in our congregation's effort to prepare this church for the next 50-100 years of being the church in this city. It was a strategic, long-term vision. When we began *Open Doors Open Futures*

downtown Minneapolis was predicted to double in population, from 35,000 in 2010 to 70,000 in 2025. The residential population is now near 60,000. Westminster wanted to prepare for that growth by creating access and parking and a facility to enhance our ministries and welcome our neighbors.

It has taken Westminster 12 years of focused effort, most recently with the *Enduring Hope* campaign, to get to the place where the future of this community of faith is now wide open. Having spent half of my ministry among you on this project, this is a source of great joy for me.

It's common these days to hear about the decline of religion in America, that the church is slowly slipping into irrelevance. A recent survey projected that within two generations Christianity will be the religion of fewer than half of Americans. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>)

Those macro-level studies and statistics do not tell the whole picture. Westminster and other congregations, large and small, aim to be Christian communities of meaning and purpose rooted in ancient biblical values that are as relevant today as they ever were: *Render to no person evil for evil. Strengthen anyone fainthearted. Support anyone weak. Heal anyone afflicted. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

There will never be a time when those ideals will not offer hope and direction for a more just and sustainable world. If the church becomes – as predicted – a minority voice, a minority presence in the future, so be it: we still have a good word, an important word, a life-giving word for a chaotic and suffering world.

I don't panic in the face of dire predictions about Christianity because the Church is not merely a sociological phenomenon. We are not the religious

equivalent of another voluntary organization suffering membership loss. *We are the Church.* We are the Body of Christ into which we will baptize little Leland Otto later in this service. This is the living community created and sustained by a love that will not let us go. Whether we're in the majority or not, frankly, is irrelevant to how we choose to live as a community that follows Jesus.

Long ago the church got used to the idea of being at the center of it all, the center of social, political, and economic life in the West – first when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and the entire empire followed suit. Then in the rise of the power of Rome over many centuries. And in more recent times, with the ascendance of Protestantism.

We may be witnessing in our time the de facto disestablishment of the church from the center of privilege and control. And that's ok – maybe even needed. But we

do not lose heart: *this is God's church, not ours*, formed by the Spirit at Pentecost and borne through history by the power of unconditional love not beholden to principalities and powers and cultures.

We have much to celebrate today, and even more to which we can look forward. Westminster has sought to open doors and open futures, to embrace hope that endures.

Together we've helped move the world a little closer to the justice for which God longs. We've helped build more than 300 units of affordable housing. We've made significant commitment to support children and young people in Black and indigenous communities, having listened to what they need most from us as partners.

We've helped teachers in South Sudan educate thousands of girls. We've brought clean water to Cuba.

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In a world where fear and animosity and injustice and violence seem to proliferate, both in our own land in other places, there is another way: *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

To proclaim that good word is our mission as followers of Jesus.

Today we rejoice that God has called this church – this *Golden Rule community of faith* – to be a telling presence in the city for generations to come.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.