

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 9, 2010
Lessons: Genesis 31:44-53 and Luke 6:31-38

RECOVERING THE GOLD

One large piece of pie remains, and the two children, sister and brother, both want some. Being three years older than her brother, the girl could cut a bigger piece for herself and later claim they had been equal. But like many mothers theirs has taught them a solution to the sharing problem: the older cuts, the younger chooses. Because it is in the girl's best interest to cut so the pieces are as nearly halves as possible, the outcome is fair.

What do the children think of their mother's solution to sharing? Without knowing them, we cannot say. The girl might resent being forced to share equally, or she might adopt a more motherly attitude of caring for and teaching her little brother. Who knows? Sometimes, she might even deliberately cut the pieces to be unequal so he can choose the bigger, and – who knows? – the day may come when he will choose the smaller so she can have more. But if either does choose to give the other the larger piece, such a choice would trouble some economists who label “irrational” any choice I knowingly make that works against my own economic interests. They say I ought not do that but should always choose what is most advantageous to me. Otherwise, I am acting irrationally.

Is it irrational for the girl to cut so her brother can take the bigger piece? Maybe she just decides to give him a present or a small moment of triumph. After his sister has deliberately cut the pie or cake unequally every now and then, affording him the larger piece, would it be irrational for him, having realized she did it purposely, to take the smaller piece for himself, leaving the bigger for her? Is there not more to life and the interplay of our relationships than taking for ourselves the best or the most? Must greed be the driving force of all rational human choice, or are we capable of learning higher, better ways?

If the girl deliberately cuts the pieces to be unequal, some would contend she must have an ulterior motive. She must want something in return for the larger piece she makes available to her brother. Otherwise, to people who think this way, she is just an irrational goody-goody, to be seen as weak and exploited without remorse. People who live by taking have no respect for those who give freely, but view them with contempt as fools.

From the piece of pie to be cut in two, it is not so long a jump to the idolatry of self-interest that has plunged us into this Great Recession. We have labored under the delusion

that if everybody were to work hard at doing what seemed most advantageous to him or her, the balance of self-serving would produce a grand society. Instead, greed has produced a huge and ever-growing gap between the rich and the rest, with a shortsightedness that could bring us all to ruin as the greedy grab profits without putting investment back into maintenance and development to sustain operations. In short, we keep killing the geese that lay the golden eggs. What will we pass on to our grandchildren but the rusted wreckage of our grab-what-you-can world? And what will we reply to a Judge who asks why we took so much for ourselves and left so many in misery?

If I were to accept the standards of prevailing economic theory, I would have to nominate Jesus as the most irrational person of all time.

I admit that until recently, the so-called “Golden Rule” never shined very brightly for me. Compared with the great command, “Love your neighbor as yourself” because you love God most of all, this “Do to others as you would have them do to you,” always seemed to me watered-down and weak. Besides, it appeared to have so many loopholes. If I liked to pick fights, should I assume others like to fight also? If I enjoy the game of outdoing the competition by whatever means I can get away with, should I feel virtuous about reveling in my dog-eat-dog world? The Golden Rule always seemed to me ethics lite, the merely nice morality for people who didn’t want to become too ruthless in their pursuit of self-interest. “That wasn’t nice?” the adult admonishes. “Would you like it if he did that to you?” The child says nothing in reply to the adult using the Golden Rule, but what he’s thinking might just be, “Do that to me? Sure, let him try.” And then, of course, there are the jokes and parodies. “Do unto others *before* they do unto you.” And so on.

But these days of triumphal greed have caused me to rethink the Golden Rule. No, it is not on a level with the Great Commandments, but it is derived from them, and it challenges the thinking of this world. It requires us to consider the needs, rights, and feelings of other people before we choose and take action. It suggests the other person has as much standing in life as I have myself, and it lays upon me a continuing responsibility for that person’s well-being. Just that much shift in our regard for other people would completely change our systems of wealth, prestige, and power. How would I want to be treated if I were in his or her position? Jesus is calling for empathy, and empathy is our God-given strength to overcome evil, to stop doing what is hurtful to another person.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you” calls me to put myself into the other person’s place, to imagine how it must feel to be in his or her position of disadvantage. The world’s creed is, “Take advantage.” Justify taking the advantage however you wish, but seize the moment of your opportunity and take that bigger piece. Anything else is to the world irrational, foolish, and contemptible. Jesus no doubt infuriated people because his

empathy with the poor, the outcast, and all the disadvantaged looked and felt like a judgment upon the virtue of the successful, the respected, and the highly religious. Empathy – that is, feeling a connection *with* as well as pity for the person who is suffering – takes action as compassion, which literally means “suffering with.” To follow the Golden Rule, we must imagine ourselves in the disadvantage or suffering we see before us. We must try to put ourselves into the other person’s place. We’re not judging people, and we’re not excusing poor choices; we’re seeking to understand how it is and how it feels to be at such disadvantage.

You are a young man with a young wife. Your families have lived for generations, poor but reasonably happy, by subsistence farming and by working in the fields for others, but now the globalized economy has made such farming profitless, and so you must find work. Your parents are aging, and your father is sick. You are told there is work for you far away, hard work but enough for you to send money home. To get the work, however, you must risk crossing a border illegally. You ask why you cannot get the papers and cross lawfully. They laugh at you. “Get in line,” they tell you. “Where is the line?” you ask. Laughing harder, they reply, “There is no line.” So, you make the journey, risk the crossing, pay the coyotes, and live in the shadows of fear. In your home, you spoke Zapotec, but you also learned Spanish, language of the conquerors, though you cannot read much of it. Your children will speak English, the language of opportunity. Fear and hard labor are for you so hope can be for them. This vignette does not answer the questions of immigration policy and national security. It does not say what the laws should be. It speaks only of understanding the human.

How might I feel if I were homeless? What is it like to be 50-something and out of work, 20-some and unable to get started? How would it feel to be followed around in stores because my skin is dark? To have my opinions dismissed because my voice is more soprano than baritone? To be slow in the supermarket because I must look at the pictures on the cans, pretending to read the ingredients? To remember that not so long ago I was much stronger than the person now calling me “frail”?

How would I feel if I were the one at the disadvantage, and what would I hope people would not do unto me? Jesus showed compassion for all sorts of people deemed not to deserve it. He brought the grace of God to the irreligious. And he paid the price. By raising him from the dead, God vindicated him and his way, including his foolish economics of human life. Taking advantage is not the only way to live. We are not just the top of the food chain. Wealth, prestige, and power are not the treasures of human life; Jesus replaces them with justice, kindness, and compassion, which begin with empathy. “If I were in his position or hers, how would I want to be treated?” It’s a start. Our calling is higher yet, but empathy is at least a start. It is the gold in the Golden Rule. Amen.