

Lies We Believe About God – Part 3
“God does not Submit” (Chapter 4, Pgs 45-50)
July 28, 2019
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Scripture: Matthew 7:12, Philippians 2:3-8, John 8:1-11

I. The Golden Rule

Our sermon series is based on a set of musings of William Paul Young interacting with religious institutions and those who work in religious-related conferences. This week’s story came out of a conference where interfaith groups were speaking about the things they had in common with one another. Sound familiar? One of the pieces of wisdom literature that can be found in a great many of the world’s religions is what many of us know as “The Golden Rule.” We just heard our own scriptures speak to this within our text from the Gospel of Matthew, “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Matthew 7:12)

We here at the Tri-Faith Initiative have spoken to this commonality ourselves. What Jesus speaks to the crowds in the Gospel of Matthew is really a paraphrase of Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And in the Islamic tradition, there is this same consideration of the neighbor, but it is stated in the Quran as a requirement of the self, to care for the neighbor by disciplining your own reactions to others. The objective in Islam is to make, even an enemy, an intimate friend. This requirement speaks to more than our own understanding of forgiveness since forgiveness does not require returning what is good for the evil. One of the pieces in the Quran reads this way, *Nor, can goodness and Evil be equal. Repel (Evil) with what is better: Then will he, between whom and you was hatred, become as it were your friend and intimate! (41:34).*

Buddhists say the number one rule of dharma is “*One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one’s own self.*” Confucius in 500 BC said, “*Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself.*” Thales of Miletus, a pre-Socratic philosopher, living in 600 BC said, “*Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing.*” There is even a written record from Egypt, thought to come from as far back as circa 2040 BC, that says, “*Now this is the command: Do to the doer to make him do.*”

The Golden Rule describes a basic empathy for one another, and calls us all to our highest sense of humanity, greeting the “other” in a way that seeks to find the best in them, rather than automatically fearing what might be the very worst in them. This principle is really at the base of all human civility. If we were not able to trust each other, even in the slightest way, civilization would be impossible. Many would call it a functional trust, that others will follow the rules that you, yourself follow, just because it is the only way we can live together with one another without fearing for our lives every minute of every day.

So, the Golden Rule is not really new. Most of us learned it right along with the Lord’s prayer at bedtime. And being the youngest of five children, I can tell you I heard it all the time from my parents! But what I thought was interesting about the way William Paul Young presented it in his story this week is that he wasn’t talking about how humans relate to one another. Young’s

question in listening to the interfaith speakers talk about the Golden Rule was whether or not this rule applied to God. He writes,

“I leaned over to Andrew and whispered, “Do you think the Golden Rule applies to God?” It was a simple question but with profound implications. Does God treat others the way God wants to be treated? If God communicated this same truth through so many messengers, it must first apply to God. But we often think that God gives commandments as if they are arbitrary tests for us humans rather than expressions of God’s own nature.”

If God is accountable to the Golden Rule then this means God acts in the world the way God wants to be treated by the world and how the world should treat each other. This makes absolute sense, really, but I’ve never thought about it in these terms before. Last week I spoke about how the very nature of God is Love, and that because we are made in the image and likeness of God, then our identity and the very core of our nature is also one of Love. Essentially, God creating us in love *IS* God treating us the way God wants to be treated, right?

We admitted in our conversation that often we do not believe God could really like us much because we, more often than not, do not act out of this same love. We were all supposed to spend some time imagining how God both loving and liking us might possibly be true, and how that would change the way we treated ourselves and each other. How did we all do with that challenge? Did it make a difference in your week?

This week William Paul Young is reinforcing the idea of God’s Love for us not being dependent on our belief in order for it to be true, and speaks to the many ways God continually submits to the decisions we make for our own lives, while continuing to create and move our bad decisions toward overall good in the world. The love in which God creates is at its heart a self-giving love and exists wholly for the sake of the other. It is through this very submission of God that creation is possible. For those of us who work with the idea of the Trinity, or the Triune nature of God, this is the relationship that holds all three expressions of God together, each one submits to the other, thereby creating something all-together new out of the love expressed through that submission.

Within creation, God relates to all that is through submission, all the time. We see it in our own Christian tradition in the cross of Christ. We see it throughout the ministry of Jesus as he cares for the poor, the widow and the orphaned. We see it when Jesus reaches out to the sick and the outcast, and how he welcomes the stranger and feeds those who are hungry. Even in his final week, Jesus bends to wash the feet of his disciples, showing them that strength and power is found in the serving of others.

If we are to rise to what it means to be fully human in our living, then we are called to live into the fullness of the love which created us. That love finds its strength and power in submission. As God submits to us by allowing us to choose our own path and make our own decisions, we too must submit to God and to others, while we ourselves make our own decisions based on our love for all.

Let us reflect on ways that God’s submission in creations has given rise to even more life and creative activity.

II. Other-Centered Love

William Paul Young says,

God submits to the decisions I make, climbs into them, and begins to craft something living and useful and good, even from the worst of my ignorant blunders—even from my overt choices to hurt and harm. Love doesn't protect me from the consequence of my choices, but it also does not abandon me to them. Nor does God's presence in the midst of our stupidity justify any of it. God is opposed to anything that is not of Love's kind, but God is always "for" us in the middle of the mess.

This idea of God being *in the middle of our mess* allows us to talk to each other about all the harmful and terrible things that happen in our lives. One of the most often heard questions I hear as a pastor is "How can God exist and allow all this violence and hate in the world?" This understanding of God submitting to us and our decisions works with the reality we see around us. Our own hatred, violence, and need for revenge is the thing causing the pain in the world. God is submitting to our choices, but sitting in the midst of the pain we create. God is present with us in our mess in order to let God's creating love shift the pain toward wholeness and healing. God is constantly reconciling our blunders, while still inviting us in to create more good in the world. What a powerful image this is of God! Can you see it? Can you let it into your understanding and belief?

My challenge to you this week is to consider those times in your life where you have felt abandoned by God, and then look at those times through this lens of submission. How might your experiences be seen in a new light? How might we all start looking for God in the midst of our pain, not to blame God, but to participate with God in working toward reconciliation and wholeness?

These are the questions I would invite you all to talk to each other about in the time remaining. Please turn to one another in groups of 3-4 and share your stories with one another.

Amen.