

A GOLDEN CONSPIRACY

the Rev. Seth Patterson

February 6, 2022

Minister for Spiritual Formation & Theater

Before I begin with what I had prepared for today, I feel compelled to speak to the absolutely unnecessary tragedy—tragedies—in our city and metro region recently. Silence from people who look like me and from stations such as this have been part of what has perpetuated the seemingly unending state-sanctioned violence against people of color and Black men in particular.

What happened this past Wednesday morning, less than a mile from where I am standing right now, is simply not acceptable. What happens again and again across our nation is not acceptable. I live and work in this city, my taxes fund this system that seems to be incapable of learning from its past. I do not have deep roots in this city, but my family has attempted to make it our home, and I find myself again confused as to the essential character of this place. I am appalled and saddened and complicit.

We are called to love our neighbors as we love our own selves. If you have any love for yourself then you must also have love for Amir Locke. Please do not let your love be silent, and please do not accept this as somehow inevitable. We must do better.

A moment of silence please for lives unnecessarily cut short . . . for someone's child . . . for all of our neighbors. Silence for Amir Locke.

* * *

Texts:

Matthew 22:37-39: Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

Leviticus 19:18: You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Sahih Muslim (Book 1, Number 72): None of you has faith until he loves for his brother or his neighbor what he loves for himself. (Hadith)

Mahābhārata 13.114.8: One should not direct towards someone else what is unpleasant to oneself: this is the moral duty in summarized form

Udanavarga 5:18: Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.

We return this February to our *Command to Preach* series, in which you the congregation submit what you would like us to preach on, and we do it! Today's submission comes from our friend Anne Seltz. She requested that someone preach on the ethical and religious maxim often called the Golden Rule. And that someone is me! And I am grateful to have chosen this passage. So, here we go. But first please join me in prayer. This is a slightly amended blessing from the recently departed Archbishop Desmond Tutu, which Anne read at our Leadership Council meeting on Wednesday. Let us pray:

God of mystery and revelation, you remind us that we are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved us long before we were created, a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared. To you we are precious, with a preciousness that is totally quite immeasurable. And you God want us to be like you. Filled with life and goodness and laughter---and joy. Amen.

* * *

Much can be made of the apparent universality of the Golden Rule, which in its simplest form states that you should love/respect/care for your neighbor as you would want them to love/respect/care for you. To love the other as you love yourself: This ethical principle is found in the five faiths that I read earlier, and I could have continued on and included texts that hold a similar ethic from other religions, such as Sikhism; Jainism; Bahai; Confucianism; Zoroastrianism; Native American spiritualities; ancient Persian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman religions; and even the modern Satanic Temple. It is powerful to note that this Golden Rule ethic of reciprocity is widespread in texts ancient and modern.

It has maybe become so commonplace that we may have stopped thinking much about it. This Golden Rule is almost universal and yet inequality, oppression, hatred, violence, and apathy persist. Anne seems to be on to something in asking that we take a deeper dive here. Just because we all share this ethical standard, we are still continually falling short of any religion's definition of a hoped-for world. How are we failing such a beautiful, universal, and seemingly simple mandate?

In my experience the flag of the Golden Rule being flown most regularly is a plea to open our eyes to our neighbors. This edict to love your neighbor as yourself is used frequently—and necessarily—to help all of us, especially those of us that hold additional privileges, to not ignore the plights of those who are in need of love/care/respect. This is important for us to remember. We live in communities of interdependence, and treating those around us with the love, care, compassion and kindness that we expect for ourselves is central to mutual thriving. This is not about just being nice to each other or being tolerant. At least in the three Abrahamic traditions, we are asked to *love* our neighbor as we *love* ourselves. It is an active word that requires effort on our part. This is not a passive love like I say I love a sandwich, but a love that requires energy, an open heart, and an ability to take a risk.

I feel confident that we all logically understand this part of the Golden Rule. We may not always do it well or remember it in moments of stress, but we can at least intellectually get behind it. And yet that is not the entirety of the Golden Rule. We are also called upon to love ourselves. And this is the part that Anne is most curious about. She says, “I was always confused by the statement ‘love thy neighbor as thyself’ because much of the time we were told we were terrible sinners, which to me meant unlovable. Also, we were criticized for playing with kids who did not belong to our church even though they were our neighbors. My lifetime has shown me and taught me that I am incapable of loving/serving others without a basic self-love.”

In this reciprocal ethic of loving the other as we love ourselves, Anne is helping us in some important ways by reminding us that this whole thing is based on an assumption. It assumes that we love ourselves. And yet we live in a society and with some religious structures that tell us that we should not love ourselves, that we are broken and sinful and not as worthy of love as others who may have more than us, because we live in a perpetuated commodification culture in which one's worth is usually tied up with their assets. The more stuff you have the more worthy of love you must be, which means that we individually and culturally often struggle with the self-love part of this equation.

Yet we are told, and maybe even understand in some ways, that God loves us no matter what, that God's love is boundless and never-ending and does not care one whit about how much money we have or what possessions we hold. God loves us simply because we are, simply because we are made of the stuff of the universe and God is found within you and me and us and them.

And yet that still doesn't quite translate back into a culture of self-love and acceptance. In fact, Anne told me that she was explicitly told by a clergy person that to even ask this question was narcissistic thinking. I respectfully disagree with my anonymous colleague and instead suggest that the scale holding our love of other and self must be recalibrated. If we cannot authentically love ourselves, then how will we ever authentically love the other? How can we mutually thrive when our love may be shallow and unknown?

Part of the reason that we may struggle to love our neighbors is because we do not know them. Equally, we may struggle to love ourselves is because we do not know ourselves. We may not love the others because we do not like what they do. The same goes for ourselves. But just as God loves us just for being, we can love ourselves without liking every part of who we are. Love doesn't demand perfection—which is lucky since it's unachievable!

If we are to fully and truly attempt to love ourselves, we must come face to face with the parts of us that we don't like, the pieces of ourselves that we find hard to love. Writer and Franciscan priest Richard Rohr continues a long tradition by calling this our "shadow selves." He writes, "Your shadow is what you refuse to see about yourself, and what you do not want others to see."¹ We are constantly hiding certain parts of ourselves from the world . . . and from our own selves. We pretend that we are solely the persona that we exhibit in the world. I am a minister, so . . . You are a mother, so . . . You are a doctor or a lawyer or a student or a bus driver, so . . . You have a lot of wealth, so . . . These are all personas that we carry forth in the world, and, while they are authentically part of us, they are not *who* we are. Each of us is also comprised of the things that we try to hide and to hide from. We will never be able to fully love ourselves if we cannot fully know ourselves. We cannot fully know ourselves until we learn to love the parts that we try to hide, the parts we may not like. Rohr again says, "To hold the full mystery of life is always to endure its other half."

And here we find the lovely embrace of paradox: In order to love yourself you must know yourself. In order to know yourself you must embrace the part of you that is unknowable and difficult to love. To love yourself is to recognize that which is hard to love and love it anyway—the way that God loves you anyway. The love of and from God is tied up in all of this. Jesus says that the two equal greatest commandments are to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind *and* to love the neighbor as you love yourself. All of this love is hard work, and it may be made a bit easier when we can rest in the knowledge that God's unending love back to us is already taken care of.

And once we have begun the shadow work of knowing and loving the parts of our own selves that are difficult to know and love, then we can begin to do the work of loving our neighbors with all of their parts that are unknowable and hard to love. All of this is mutual and reciprocal. I love myself so that I can love you so that you can love yourself so that you can love me. It reminds me of something Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön once wrote. She said: "Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity."²

What are your shadow selves that are difficult to know, acknowledge, or love? What would it take for you to face them and do the difficult work of beginning to love these parts of you? Would it be easier to face them and love them if you knew that you were not alone in doing it, that you were part of a community that is doing this work alongside of you, a community that will work to love you better as they also work to love themselves better?

¹Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 127–128.

²Pema Chödrön, *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala, 2018), 73.

What if this was our conspiracy together, our Golden Conspiracy? That word may seem an odd choice here because it often implies nefarious motives. The word though just literally means “to breathe together.”³ And breathing together implies reciprocity and interdependence. So, what if this was our conspiracy together, that we breathed together the work of loving ourselves so that we can love each other? What if we breathed within, among, and beyond our own selves? A conspiracy of love and knowing, of compassion and mutual thriving. A breathing together to know that we are not alone, that we are loved and lovable so that we can love our neighbors and be lovable to our neighbors. A conspiracy that doesn’t ignore the shadows but understands that everything in the light has a shadow. May we make it so.

³Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 92.