**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**
**Sunday, February 24, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings:**

**GENESIS 45:** beginning at verse 4
*"Come closer to me," Joseph said to his brothers. They came closer. "I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. But don't feel badly, don't blame yourselves for selling me. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives.*
*There has been a famine in the land now for two years; the famine will continue for five more years - neither plowing nor harvesting.*
*God sent me on ahead to pave the way and make sure there was a remnant in the land, to save your lives in an amazing act of deliverance.*
*So you see, it wasn't you who sent me here but God. He set me in place as a father to Pharaoh, put me in charge of his personal affairs, and made me ruler of all Egypt…*
*Joseph then kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Only then were his brothers able to talk with him.*

**LUKE 6:27-36**
*"To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst.*
*When someone gives you a hard time, respond with prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.*
*"Here is a simple rule for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them!*
*If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that's charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that.*
*"I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You'll never - I promise - regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. Our Father is kind; you be kind.*

**Sermon: To you who listen - Baden Powell Sunday**

Jesus said: “But I say to you that listen, ... Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

Those are probably some of the best known and yet the most misinterpreted words of Jesus’ teaching.

The words have a practical ring to them, like something you might see on a poster in a school hallway or a conference room. Imagine a beautiful, color photograph, with people of different cultures and ethnicities working together or maybe children from all around the world holding hands in a big circle. Over the picture the positive spin on Jesus’ traditional words: "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

We know those words as the Golden Rule. They're not unique to Jesus; they're found in the gospels of Luke and in Matthew but are clearly quoted from the Hebrew scriptures, and also found in the ancient writings of ancient Greeks and Romans like Homer and Seneca. They are also found in Islam, Hinduism and Indigenous spirituality. This is the kind of wisdom we all need: we probably

learned it as children when a parent or a teacher took us aside after we stole our friend's toy and asked us: "How would it feel if he did that to you?"

It can be tempting to boil the whole Bible down to one verse like this, to print it on placemats and bookmarks and be done with it.
And why not? It's a verse people can understand – it speaks to the practical wisdom about getting along. Well, sorry, it's not possible, even with a very good one like "Do unto others..."

If we pull the Golden Rule out of the context of this whole chapter of Jesus' teaching, then we miss the depth of the challenge that Jesus was handing his listeners. We have to go back to the beginning of the paragraph. Jesus began with words that sound a lot less practical, "Love your enemies." Not just once but he repeated it again a few verses later.

For us as people "who listen" to Jesus this is the challenge: the Golden Rule applies for us even when the other person in the equation doesn't know it or they know it but they don't act on it – when the "enemy" is someone who won't treat us the way we'd like to be treated. And this is where Jesus' teaching becomes a challenge. This is when it gets hard.

We live in a world where conflict is normal. Different people, with different priorities. All are struggling to get their needs met, their visions affirmed, their perspectives to the top of the pile. There's nothing wrong with that. Conflict is normal.

What's problematic is the way that we go about resolving those conflicts. Culturally, as European-settler-democracy supporting citizens, we thrive on a system of winners and losers. Vote for me, or vote for my opposition. Choose a side – take a stand. Don't get caught sitting on the fence – don't be wishy washy – just be sure you choose the winning side.

What if, instead of sides, we saw the world for what it really is – a circle. A big round globe of diversity. Sometimes you might agree with me, sometimes not. But if we were to work together, to love even our enemies and their different perspectives – who knows? We might have enough resources to do everything that is needed.

Jesus is not calling us to be doormats – look again. When Jesus tells us to "turn the other cheek" he is not telling us to be beaten down, but to stand with dignity and ask the person who has struck us down what they think their violence will accomplish. Only more violence, more grudges, more anger and hurt and a harsh cycle that spins out eventually to war.

There's an old story about a snake that inhabited a rural village. Every time the villagers went out to work in the fields, the snake would come and bite them, leaving them with terrible sores. Even those who went out to try and kill the snake were bitten and had to be carried home. So many people suffered because of the snake that few dared to go into the fields, and the whole village was going hungry.

So, the matter was taken to a wise person, who stood at the edge of the field and sang to the snake of love and peace and community. The songs tamed the snake and persuaded it to listen to the wise one's teaching and the practice of nonviolence. But when the villagers discovered that now the snake was harmless, they took to hurling stones at it and dragging it by its tail. The battered and disillusioned snake crawled to the wise one and complained bitterly.

"You've stopped frightening people with your bite," the wise one said, "that's bad."
The snake was incredulous. "But you were the one who taught me to practice the discipline of nonviolence."

"Oh," said the wise one, "I told you to stop hurting people, I didn't tell you to stop **hissing** at them."

The snake in the story may have lost its bite, but it did not need to lose its voice. Its voice was the non-violent alternative to the venom that made people ill. The hiss made them stop and think: "I'd better be careful where I am walking."

The word non-violent modifies **how** we resist when we are treated unjustly by others. It doesn't mean we stop resisting. Jesus was not calling his followers to be push-overs, but rather to seek justice in the most peaceful and constructive way possible.

Desmond Tutu once said, a justice-seeking people is more dangerous to a tyrant than ones that bear arms. We have to be careful, in the struggle for justice, that we do not become what we hate in someone else.

This teaching is tough in its challenge, and radical, in a world that seems to profit from putting people at odds with each other. We seek ways of softening Jesus' words, making it into a two-line catch-phrase that fits on a bookmark, so we can bypass the unfinished work it represents.

There's an old joke about a driver who stopped longer than usual at an intersection before making his left turn, so that a pedestrian can make it safely across. This infuriated the driver behind him, who also missed the green light as a result. She honked on her horn, opened her window and yelled at the car in front, made a few unfortunate hand gestures. While she was waiting for the light to change again, she heard a tapping on the window. It was a police officer, pulling her over. She asked to see the drivers' license, and made her get out of the car, while the officer went back to the cruiser to call the information in.

When the officer finally returned, she gave the driver all her cards back, and said: "You'll have to excuse me. When I pulled up behind you, I could see you honking and swearing and making rude gestures. Then I noticed the chrome Jesus fish on your trunk and the bumper sticker that said: "Honk if you love Jesus." Naturally I assumed you had stolen the car."

I guess the driver had forgotten how hard it is to follow the Golden Rule. May we go forth, living (and driving) as those who love God and each other. Amen