

The Nature of Right Relationships

Leviticus 19: 1, 2, 9-18

Last week when I was in Florida visiting my family to celebrate my mother's 85th birthday, a surprising amount of our conversation focused on a courtroom drama riveting those in and around the Jacksonville area. The defendant was Michael Dunn, a 47-year-old man who was convicted on three counts of attempted murder by a jury that took four long days to deliberate and declare their verdict. On the most serious charge, first degree murder, no verdict was reached, resulting in a mistrial.

This courtroom spectacle made national news, as you know, coined as the "loud music" trial, since the prosecution charged the defendant with shooting at four unarmed youth, killing one of them, 17-year-old Jordan Davis. The incident was set off by Dunn's apparent annoyance and complaint over the volume of music being played in the Dodge Durango driven by the teenagers and Dunn's belief that his own life was in danger because he claimed he felt threatened by the youth who he believed were armed "thugs". It wasn't exactly the "stand your ground" defense that fellow Floridian George Zimmerman used when he was on trial for killing Trayvon Martin, but it brought all that can go wrong with that Florida law back into the national spotlight, including the issues of racism.

There's so much more to this story that we discussed in endless conversation last week, but the bottom line for me is, what makes this situation so tragic is that it could have been easily avoided. This incident serves as yet another case study for how things can go wrong. Michael Dunn and the four teenagers had no prior history before that

chance encounter outside of a convenience store on a November 2012 evening. No one involved had a criminal background or checkered past. So how do you explain it? What would have precipitated such a deadly confrontation? What is it about human nature that leads a person to act out in such a rash manner?

There are as many possible explanations as there are opinions: temporary insanity, easy access to a gun, unusual fear and vulnerability, a deeply flawed character, racism and bigotry, human sin and moral depravity—just to name a few. As I thought about all those things, if you subtract out the violence, I realized this chance encounter between annoyed and overreacting people could happen to anyone. You and I could have been in that situation. People get upset all the time; annoyances occur to us every day, which is why we learn how to deal with them by managing our reactions appropriately.

Normally, we don't cross the threshold into violence or harm because *it is in our own self-interest* to maintain control! If we overreact, we usually get ourselves in trouble. Most laws of the land are set up to inhibit us from acting out in ways that harm others because the consequences for those actions will be detrimental to us. There is self-interest built right into our need for self-control. In Michael Dunn's case, it was in his best interests not to react in the manner he chose; he could have avoided the confrontation and went on his way.

This wisdom and persuasive power of self-interest may be the strongest inhibitor we humans have, which is why it continually plays a role in moral, civil, and criminal law. Self-interest guides our conscience; it often keeps us from making foolish and grievous

mistakes. Here, I make a distinction between self-interest (which is this natural, self-preserving concern) and selfish interests, which are more self-gratifying and the underlying motivation for why people manipulate and exploit others for their own gain.

This distinction is important to make, especially when you consider self-interest lies at the heart of even the most basic moral principle we have on earth, i.e., do to others what you would want done to you. The Golden Rule is a moral principle found in virtually every major religion and culture. It's a moral guide that inspires us to be considerate of others by evaluating it in terms of what we would want to happen to ourselves. It's a morally positive form of the ancient judicial law *lex talionis*, i.e., "an eye for an eye...". Part of the motivation to act appropriately and morally is from the perspective of self-interest. Treat people as *you* would like to be treated! Altruism, or the ability to give of ourselves to others, is rooted in self-interest. It's an exchange of trust—one favor will return another. We know how it works: in the care and consideration we offer another, we are more likely to receive the same in return. In effect, we take care of ourselves by taking care of others. This is the self-generating motive inherent to the Golden Rule.

This exchange of trust found in taking care of our neighbor is critically important to our own sense of safety and well being. It helps us counter fear by consciously being on the offensive by acting first with goodwill. In practice, it makes a significant psychological impact by undoing the self-centered, egotistical part in our human nature (that spawns selfish interests) by focusing us outward toward others. Even when it doesn't do this successfully (such as when

people act charitably and mercifully solely out of duty or obligation), it still works in so many situations of life to prevent things from going wrong. Let me put it this way: had Michael Dunn viewed Jordan Davis and his friends in the manner he wanted to be treated, and had they done the same to him—with respect, with dignity, with understanding, as another human being and not some threatening object that provokes fear—it’s likely this moment of annoyance could have passed without either side reacting with anger. Both of their lives would have been saved.

That’s the point, isn’t it? The value of living by the Golden Rule, with its implicit tolerance, respect, consideration, and mercy toward others is because wisdom and experience teach us, more good comes from these kinds of responses than with angry, aggressive, and especially abusive assaults. Imagine how many relationships, let alone lives, could be spared sorrow and hardship if people would simply follow this very basic rule! If we valued our neighbors even half as much as we protect our own self interests, then we would be far closer to the ideal of living in right relationship with others that God sets before us so often in Scripture.

It’s interesting to me, of course, how much Jesus made this an emphasis in his teachings. What we may not realize is that the Golden Rule wasn’t original with him; it is far more ancient and Jesus, himself, was largely following the Golden Rule teachings of the great Jewish rabbi, Hillel, who lived a generation prior to him. This included embracing Hillel’s highlighting of an underappreciated phrase in Leviticus 19:18, where it says, “to love your neighbor as

yourself.” Hillel emphasized this as a model of virtuous and righteous behavior.

What may have been unique to Jesus was the ultimate significance of this moral principle. Namely, for Jesus, loving one’s neighbor was *morally equivalent* to loving God! This binding of two commandments could very well have been unique to Jesus, which tells us something about his *chutzpah*, as well as its importance as a moral truth. It also tells us something about God and where our priorities should lie in terms of being faithful—how God views our faithfulness. Since Jesus summarized all of the commands of the Law and the wisdom of the Prophets in the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) and coupled together loving God and one’s neighbor as a joint moral principle (Luke 10:27; cf. Mt. 19:16-22; Mk. 10:17-31; Lk. 18:18-30), this means if we want to be in right relationship with God, then we must also make our relationship with our neighbor *right*!

This relationship between these two great commandments may have been already implied in the context of Leviticus 19, which is our lectionary text for today. Here, the question to explore is, how is a right relationship demonstrated? It’s intriguing to wonder what might have been criteria Jesus would have used when reflecting on this passage and the importance of living in right relationships. For operating by the Golden Rule and showing love and consideration to one’s neighbor has many challenging contexts—situations where people often treat others as mere objects to fear or to be manipulated for selfish gain and interests. To love one’s neighbor means to look out for their interests as much as you would your own. So let’s briefly

explore these verses, with an eye for appreciating what the practice of loving one's neighbor actually means.

Verses nine and ten are directed to agrarian landowners—land being the primary way one could establish status and reap wealth in ancient times. Obviously, it's still true. Given the limited amount of fertile, arable land in the region of ancient Israel, ownership was highly valued and prized. So possessing and then maximizing the value of land in a harvest was the primary self-interest of many. People like to maximize their profits and their assets, even without regard to others.

Yet, look at the instruction/commandment: to not reap to the edges of the field so as to allow those who lacked land, or income, or status to come and harvest what they could for the purpose of their own survival and welfare. I see it as a rather progressive view of land ownership, allowing those who had no claims on the land or its harvest to glean and benefit from it. Why would landowners not be entirely free to do what they wanted with their own land? Because they had more than enough and often neglected or dismissed the needs of their poorer neighbors. What we have here is a claim of justice upon those with plenty for the neighbors who were without, but also an appeal to an owner's self-interest. To be generous with what they had kept people from stealing from them or even preventing a possible insurrection over injustice. Consideration for the social welfare of all was what keeps society stable and safe for all, including the affluent. So treat others as you would like to be treated.

Verses eleven and twelve address honesty in interpersonal relations and in business transactions. The rules to live by for

everyone was for no stealing, no fraud, no lying or cheating, and no deception. Any deceitful act was to be perceived as if you were doing the same to the Lord, your God. That, in God's justice, would have lasting consequences! Again, treat others as you would like to be treated.

The next two verses repeat the same obligation, with an added duty for businesses and bosses not to withhold wages of their employees and laborers for the owners' benefit. Withholding wages was cheating a laborer from what they rightfully earned.

Additionally, one was not to revile, disparage, or victimize anyone who was disabled, deaf, or blind. They are not objects of ridicule or for exploitation. They are human beings and children of God. Treat them as you would want to be treated.

Continuing on, the next two verses address judgments made about anyone in society, particularly those that unfairly attack others. Judgments have to be just, not biased, all across the board—not based on a predisposition to favor the rich or the poor—but considering each circumstance on its own merit. Very powerful is the duty not to slander others or to benefit from a neighbor's misfortune, usually exploiting your neighbor's difficulties for your own selfish interest and gain. Treat another as you would want to be treated!

The 17th and 18th verses focus on the closest relationships in life: family and close neighbors. One shall not hate any of their kin, or verbally assault their neighbor. Neither shall one take vengeance upon another person, regardless of the reasons behind it. Nor shall one bear a grudge against or stubbornly resent anyone in your household or those around.

All of these are the applications, then, get summarized in the half verse: You shall love your neighbor, as yourself: I am the Lord. We, of course, could come up with other examples and commandments that could apply right out of our own lives. The point of knowing the Golden Rule and the message to love our neighbors as ourselves is to make it directly applicable to our lives in the settings we find ourselves and in the outlook we have toward others, particularly those we might treat like objects or in ways that stereotype and rob them of their humanity. Treat others just like you want to be treated in this exchange of trust!

It's fairly easy, I suppose, to cite the examples of terrible crimes and injustices that stand out horrifically, much like Michael Dunn's killing of Jordan Davis. We can analyze all that went down about their encounter that went wrong and that, in our best estimation, we would not repeat. However, that would miss the intention of Jesus' teaching. How we treat our neighbor is measured each and every time we encounter another and whether or not we handle it with as much grace and understanding and empathy as we know we should. It's in our own self-interest to treat other people well! It's in the nature of right relationships when we take care of each other in an exchange of trust. It's not about being perfect all the time, but it's about taking this so seriously that we will not allow ourselves to lose sight of what is of ultimate value to God and to us.

That, of course, is life—the life God grants to any living being. Life to each person is a gift and the lives of others are gifts to us. Our divine duty is to value life—not only our own, but that of others, especially those with whom we are but strangers and in whom we

have little investment—those we can easily objectify. Why? Because in the heart of heaven, each person is loved by the God we love, and to harm in any way, another whom God loves, diminishes our own value and worth as a person, let alone our capacity to love and care. Psychologically, spiritually, and morally we lose a part of God within us if we diminish a part of God in someone else. And, in the great circle of interrelated life, as the Golden Rule tells it, we love others so we will actually be able to love ourselves.

Perhaps, that's what will motivate us to think wisely and well in the chance encounters of our lives and in all of our relationships, so that we may simply, effectively and consistently treat them right.

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