

## **January 6, 2019 Session Led by the Fulfilling Our Vision Ad Hoc Committee – United Church of Strafford, Vermont**

Attendees: Tom Kinder, Meg Albee, Joey Hawkins, Deadra Ashton, Chuck Ashton, Kay Plunkett, Ken Bushnell, Shannon Varley, Gretchen Hannon, John Hawkins, Christa Wurm, Jim Schley, Danette Harris, Cameron Speth, Becky Bailey, Russ Farley, Martha Manheim

(Annemieke and Jeremiah McLane were present for the initial poster notes as may have been some others. In that exercise we had answered three questions about the following issues: Climate Change and Environmental Degradation; Economic Inequity and Poverty; Racism and Bigotry; Injustice, Inequality or Abuse Related to Gender or Sexuality (including Women and L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+ People); Refugees and Immigration; War and Militarism. The questions were, 1. What might it look like to apply the Golden Rule to this issue? 2. What feels positive to me about applying the Golden Rule to our actions on this issue? 3. What makes it feel difficult or complicated to apply the Golden Rule?)

Instructions: Next meeting on the 20th will follow up what happens today. The goal of this entire process is to discern how our congregation feels called to fulfill the part of our Future Directions Vision that says “We intend to be a force, not merely a presence, effecting positive social change for peace, justice and the care of God’s creation.” This second half of today’s meeting will follow the restorative justice circle format. Timed responses going around in order, anyone can pass and then speak at the end of that round if they want, clarifying questions allowed. Speak from your own perspective, don’t comment on what others have said. This is a listening circle.

### **Question 1: What did you observe or learn through the process of answering the questions on the walls?**

1. Important to get so many perspectives, grateful for the diversity among us. Glad to be able to understand my own perspective and listen to other people’s. It is valuable to listen and be open and available to take it all in.
2. I recognized in a good way that the Golden Rule (GR) does apply to lots of things in big and little ways, big global things as well as small personal ones, and liked that that this came out of a church meeting.
3. GR was not as obvious as I thought it was – I thought that I lived my life by the GR, but the “how does it look” question highlighted that in some areas it is easier to follow the GR than in others.
4. I haven’t thought about the GR in years but I do try to live my life this way.
5. I appreciated the sermon and service and the attention to the GR. I’m not smart enough – it is very difficult to apply the GR to many of the areas that my partner and I have been involved with, eg climate change. It feels easier to apply to poverty or inequality. There is a lot to learn about how we can do that.
6. I am going to be brutally honest. This is an important exercise. I have witnessed a lot of small injustices in our little town in the past few months. I am struggling a bit, doing what I can to be an agent of change, recognizing how that can vibrate its way out into the world. Participating in the meditation group is helping. Unless we each apply the GR all of the time, in each moment, from the inside out. Violence can be the result of self-hatred, so the work has to happen from the inside out. I agree with wanting to come to a consensus on these issues. Hard to know how it will play out, how to embrace our own part and accountability. How does the little bit that I can do fit into the whole? Being brave enough to be in the microcosms of these issues here and now (in town) in a way that is thoughtful and conscientious.
7. I am amazed that this many people will sit down and talk about these things. For me it comes out of the contemplative work that I’ve been privileged to participate in over the past year.
8. This meeting is the application of the GR. The complications and difficulties were the same across the issues: fear, lack of trust, those who benefit from racism and environmental degradation. How do I act as a white person to apply the Golden Rule in the face of racism? What does that mean to me?

9. Lots to talk about. I am constantly aware of how little tolerance I have for people with a different point of view to what feels obvious to me. I observe my own impatience, bafflement with fear, excitement about diversity. I am glad I am not dealing with these issues alone.
10. Acceptance and respect kept coming up as we looked at applying the golden rule to these issues. What does that look like, accepting and being respectful in every situation? The obstacles in all cases were fear and selfishness. The two ways to approach the GR are acceptance and respect.
11. The obstacles were in my own mind – the limits of my own experience and awareness. The need for greater awareness is an obstacle. One fear is causing offense while trying to get a better understanding. To address racism and bigotry requires addressing how segregated we are – the enormity of undoing that is daunting.
12. Applying the GR globally feels overwhelming. I needed to rescale it to an issue where what we do can make a difference.
13. I felt like I was swimming in a big sea – it was too big and I needed to get it down smaller. I had a complex reaction. I have to protect myself in this wicked world or else someone else has to do it for me.
14. I am listening. Can't be active because my vision is somewhere else right now and that is all right. I am here.
15. I appreciate the uniqueness of this group. I learned the GR in school. There are people now who might not have ever learned it. What do we do about that? It is so good we are talking about it.
16. Unsure of how to answer the question "What would it look like to apply the GR"
17. If the question was "How would I apply the golden rule in MY life" rather than the bigger scale questions that would have felt more useful

**Question 2: Invitation to share a story about how you acted in an encounter when you were challenged to follow the golden rule or love your neighbor as yourself, what happened and what helped you act in accordance with the GR to the extent that you did?**

1. Anxious about getting to know my new neighbor, afraid of how I may be received, want to be brave enough to knock and introduce myself even though we are very different from one another. Trying to be brave and speak up about things that aren't well received. Saying out loud "I'm doing this out of love" and checking with myself to confirm that really is the goal. How do you shine light on something when the light feels negative, but is working in a positive direction? How to reiterate "I'm coming from love." If you're not sure where you are coming from, be curious.
2. I don't stop for hitchhikers, I used to work in a city with lots of people asking for money, a pregnant woman holding a sign in the rain felt right to give to, I felt ok about that. Then a colleague told me that what I didn't see was the handler/human trafficker nearby, but that maybe my contribution had made the pregnant woman successful and improved her day even if it was compromised by the complicated situation.
3. At a recent school board meeting I wanted to make sure that all families would have access to a newly hired middle school consultant and I was told in a very rude way that I wasn't allowed to ask a question, it was very awkward and very hard. I was there because I care. I was upset, ashamed, felt like I had no voice, that the work I do didn't matter. First response was to retreat to taking care of my own family, then I was angry and wanted to strike back, now it has circled around and I know how to deliver what I need to say, in a place that comes from love. I will be brave and meet this with empathy and understanding and love and it will be ok.
4. I am responding to recent difficult changes in communication with a family member by listening at a deeper level. Over time it may help. It's real and I'm in it.

5. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade I learned about intolerance and cruelty – was involved with a group of boys who mercilessly picked on someone and got called on it. I couldn't believe what I had done, and have never joined another group in order to protect myself from ever behaving that way again.
6. Not always sure the GR is the right response. Sometimes it seems too slow, too passive, I want action, not baby steps, not slow steps. Two things that help: 1) Having kids, because I don't want THEM to act that way (impatient), 2) youtube video of a tall, dignified black man wearing a hat showing tremendous courage after being attacked and knocked down by white crowd.
7. The first two questions in our poster exercise allow me to have enlightened opinions. The third question makes me wonder why everyone else doesn't share my opinions. Now this question takes it to another level. I provide excuses every moment of every day about things I can't do. This gives me more empathy for people who can't commit. At a stop sign, I didn't have money, I offered an apple. That felt a little better than doing nothing, so now I take apples with me.
8. During the holiday season I worried a lot about having family members who were political polar opposites. Tried to find a peaceful place of avoidance. I think I am right, my relative thinks that he is right. It is hard to respect an opinion that I believe is wrong. The golden rule tells me I should respect that opinion, accept that we disagree. I am ashamed that I have a hard time being respectful. I also feel chicken when I don't address the issue.
9. Honesty is most important. Standing up for someone, being honest when I encounter unkindness or racism. If we are honest we do treat people better.
10. There are limits to the GR. My instinct is to give and give and give but I get my head sliced off. It is a hard world and you have to deal with the realities. I can't do it all.
11. It is complicated – how to explain to kids why I don't give money to people with signs at the West Lebanon stoplights, because I'm not sure it truly helps their situation. So I could give to the Haven or other agencies that I know DO help but I don't follow up.
12. If someone is being difficult, I try to communicate that I value them as a person even though I don't like what they are doing. How can I make this clear in this situation, if I don't get it right, how can I fix it for next time. It's complicated at the macro and micro levels. In the film Gandhi, he starts a meeting with the British by offering them tea – entering a potentially difficult meeting by offering them tea, showing them that he valued them.
13. Keeping silent in the face of political polar opposites (like racism or climate change denial) feels like the opposite of following the GR. Seems like backing away from these conversations is NOT following the GR.
14. It is important to communicate that you value the people even if you don't agree with what they are doing. What does it mean to separate what someone is doing from who they are? Complicated work.

**Additional questions we didn't have time to address:**

1. It is obvious from our poster exercise that our society has a hard time living by the Golden Rule in all these issue areas. What could help our country change its policies and culture so that our society would reflect the Golden Rule and loving our neighbor as our self in all the issue areas we considered?
2. What could we as a church do to change the consciousness and values of society around us so that it did live by the Golden Rule and ethics of love?

Tom concluded saying that in the scripture passage today the Magi (Wise Men) were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, but to go home by another way. It is clear that we cannot keep going the way we have been, but the other way is going to be hard. We have begun to see how hard or complicated it can be to apply the Golden Rule in personal situations as well as big social issues. It may be hard, but this is the other way we now need to take as a society. We need to keep asking what would the Golden Rule and love of neighbor have us do. We will learn through asking, we will learn through reaching our limits and having to try again, we will

learn from experience and trial and error and circle conversations like this one what it takes to live this way that all the spiritual traditions say is the one ethical, moral, sustainable way for us to live. We need to accept that yes, the golden rule is really hard and it is exactly what we have to do in order for human civilization to survive and to prevent all the extinctions that are coming, perhaps including our own. We need to face our fear and selfishness and find this one way of hope.

Wall posters with questions will stay up for a few weeks – please add to them and encourage others to do so.

This has been an amazing event—we have so much to celebrate: the sound of everyone engaging with the posters and the depth of thoughtfulness and sharing in this circle and all the work of the Ad Hoc Committee that went into planning this. Please come to next meeting on 1/20 after church where we will pick up from here and keep moving toward fulfilling our vision. Thank you!