

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
October 18, 2009
“LIVING BY THE GOLDEN RULE”
Mark 10:35-45
8:45 A.M. SERVICE**

James and John saw a way to transcend their economic and social limitations. They had their mother ask Jesus for the highest positions in his coming kingdom. Jesus showed them the transcendent beauty of the selfless servant.

The best way to hide the limits of your knowledge, it's been said, is not to transgress them! Seriously, few things contribute more to successful living than an honest acceptance of our limits. This does not mean we should set a low ceiling on our potential, but that we avoid self-delusion about our strengths and weaknesses.

The pursuit of excellence and the desire for success are morally neutral. What makes them worthy or unworthy is the goal that is desired or pursued. Jesus saw greatness in servant hood. There is no greater way of doing God's will than in serving other people.

The human spirit, like a captive bird, wants to be free. Confinement is cruel and limitations are stifling. Robert Frost wrote, **“Something there is that doesn't love a wall.”** This **“something”** is in all of us. We long to transcend our restrictions. When someone chooses isolation it is often a sign of serious illness. The healthy spirit sings: **“Oh, give me land, lots of land / Under starry skies above / Don't fence me in.”** (Cole Porter) Yet, human life is always lived within limits of one kind or another. The challenge to every one of us is to find meaningful life within limits.

The disciples of Jesus believed that he had no limitations whatsoever. A quick reflection on the things they had seen him do explains why. They had seen him change water into wine. They had seen him feed thousands of people with a boy's lunch. They had seen him raise Lazarus from the dead. Anyone who could do these things could do anything! Jesus could re-establish Israel's power and

prominence in the world. He could restore the glory days of King David. The disciples' confidence in Jesus was unbounded. Therefore, James and John asked Jesus for the two places of honor, one on his right hand and one on his left, when he came to power.

The disciples did not understand the nature of Jesus' kingdom. All their lives they had been imbued with Israel's messianic expectation. The Messiah would be a nationalistic military conqueror, who would destroy Israel's enemies and rule as God's anointed one. They were no different in this from most Jews. Jesus responded to their request by saying, "***You do not know what you are asking.***" He asked if they were able to drink his cup and endure his baptism, referring to his suffering and death. Still thinking in military terms, they said, "***We are able.***" Such moments must have been very discouraging to Jesus.

Jesus' limits were self-imposed. They were the limitations of obedience to God and of love. Greatness in his kingdom is not in ruling, but in serving. The "***Son of man came not to be served but to serve,***" he said, "***and to give his life as a ransom for many.***" Have you ever asked Jesus for something beyond his limits to give?

We humans have at least two kinds of limitations. First, there are our **given** limitations. Some of these we have in common with all human beings, and some we have because each of us is a unique individual. We should never underestimate our potential or shy away from challenges, but it is important to know and accept our limitations. When we know our weaknesses, and guard against them, they become our strengths. A sign of spiritual maturity is being realistic about both one's capabilities and one's limitations. Faith involves accepting our limits in relation to God's sovereign power.

Second, we all have self-imposed limitations. Here our values and our faith come into play. If we respect the individuality and freedom of another person, for example, we will not seek to control or dominate that person. We limit our interaction with that person to the principle expressed in the Golden Rule. If we genuinely believe in the primacy of truth and goodness, we will regard falsehood and evil as off-limits to us. If marriage partners believe in the sanctity of their vows, they will stake out limits accordingly. If, for health's sake, we commit ourselves to weight loss and fitness, we will build fences around fast foods and ice cream. Self-imposed limitations function, not to punish us, but to enhance and enrich our lives.

Jesus did not impose limitations on himself because he found pleasure in suffering. He was no masochist! Jesus' self-imposed limits were free choices, made in the knowledge that obedience to God's will was the only way to experience life at its best. Jesus knew that love for God and love for the neighbor, far from being burdensome obligations, led to the highest joy.

At every turn we experience limits - - the limits of our existence, our power, our intelligence. These limits are often the cause of suffering. There are things we can do, but to do them causes suffering to us or to someone else. There are also things we cannot do, because we are not strong enough, wise enough, or talented enough, and therefore suffering results. Genesis tells of the limits imposed on the first pair, and of the suffering that resulted from their transgression. Seen this way, limits are negative and threatening. But limits can also be a blessing.

Children cannot understand some of the limits parents place on them. They see only the restriction of their mobility and curiosity. **"You won't let us play in the street!"** Only later do they understand that these limits were for their protection. As God's children we do the same thing, testing the limits established for our well being. There is a moral order built into life. We do not so much break its laws as get broken by them! Like every good parent, God sets limits because God loves us.

My Catholic colleagues speak of the **"sacrament"** of limits. It is only within our God-ordained limits that we thrive and experience the fullness of life. But, more importantly, our limits facilitate our knowledge of God. Our finitude points us to the Infinite. Our temporality has echoes of the Eternal. Our imperfect love opens us to God's perfect love. Such is the grace of the sacrament of limits. **"Art consists of limitation,"** claimed G. K. Chesterton. **"The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame."**

A familiar psychological definition of personal maturity is the ability to delay gratification. In other words, maturity involves living with certain self-imposed limitations. The child in each of us struggles with this idea, and yet such limitations are for our own happiness and growth. Perhaps the best-known self-imposed limitation is what we call the Golden Rule: ***"Do to others as you would have them do to you."*** Ironically, when Jesus calls us to serve one another, he is showing us the way to fulfillment and joy. In this stewardship season, you will not be asked to exceed the limits of your possibilities.

In Christ, God assumes human limitations. What kind of Savior would Jesus be if he faced no human struggles, knew no temptations, felt no pain from betrayal and suffering? Jesus proved his lordship in the crucible of human life and death.

If you are ready to explore the boundaries of your life, within the limits of your capacity to give, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.