**The Spirituality of Mediation: Applying the Golden Rule; Transforming Talking into Communication, By Philip Mulford, J.D.**

**Published, Virginia Episcopalian Magazine**

“Love one another as I have loved you.” John 15:12

Most everyone knows the golden rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Children hear this concept early in life. There seems to be a tendency, however, to think that this interpersonal discipline only applies to physical actions. Even people who wouldn’t think of physically hitting someone else, even if they lost their temper, will yell, scream, glower or intimidate others with non-physical behavior that is completely inconsistent with the golden rule. Maybe the problem is that “Do unto others…” sounds like it refers only to physical actions. But most personal interaction is not physical. In fact, most personal interaction, most of the way people treat others, is verbal and non-physical. Words, gestures, body language, tone of voice are all part of people’s verbal, non-physical treatment. Whether by way of email, letters, the telephone, voice mail, or direct personal talking, people spend a substantial portion of their day attempting to communicate with their children, spouses, friends, co-workers, neighbors and all those they encounter in their daily life. The discipline of the golden rule applied to communication would change dramatically the way people said things, the words they chose, the level and tone of their voice and the gestures and body language with which they accompanied their words. Mediation, at its essence, is a structured application of the golden rule to talking and then the transformation of talking into communication.

For some reason, it is too easy for people to overlook the means by which they express themselves. For “good reason” one might say, or “without thinking,” or “because the other person wouldn’t listen,” people yell, scream, cuss, throw up their hands in disgust, turn and walk away indignantly, glare menacingly, interrupt, talk over others to make themselves heard or otherwise express themselves in a manner that no one would like if on the receiving end. Is there any doubt that the screamer wouldn’t want to be screamed at, the curser cursed, the person who walked away, walked away from, the interrupter interrupted? But this kind of behavior permeates society. Worse, this kind of behavior is taught and accepted by society’s daily application of it.

People expressing themselves to others are “doing unto others.” The discipline of the golden rule when applied to those expressions would most likely be characterized by, among other things, a calm, gentle and peaceful demeanor; a quiet and tender voice; a willingness and patience to listen when the other was speaking; a recognition that the other’s point of view is just as valuable as one’s own and deserves to be understood; an acceptance that the other’s point of

view, not surprisingly, differs from one’s own simply because each of us is unique - not for any malicious or underhanded reason; and, most importantly, a constant and conscious awareness of God’s holy presence and that, no matter what, the other person is also a child of God.

Imagine an environment where the rules of talking included not only rules against hitting one another, but also rules against yelling, screaming, cussing, etc. Or, put another way, the golden rule was applied not only to physical actions, but non-physical actions. Mediation offers that environment. Whether, in family or marital conflict, including separation and divorce, business or contract disputes, government or community controversy, or disagreements within the church, mediation gives people the chance to talk with each other with the help of a mediator who, among other things, instills and maintains the discipline of the golden rule. Recognizing that it is all too easy to overlook that discipline, a mediator helps people become conscious of it and establishes a structure that encourages and supports the discipline. The opportunity to express one’s perspective to the other without fear of interruption, with the knowledge that the other is listening for the sole purpose of understanding and with the knowledge that the process will only proceed once confirmation of that understanding occurs, constructively recharacterizes the entire interaction. The transformation that takes place in people during mediation is truly spiritual and can be life changing.

Even in the most bitter of relationships, mediation transforms personal interaction from argumentative and adversarial to cooperative and collaborative. Even where one person sees black, the other white, mediation enables each person to understand the other’s viewpoint. Reaching an understanding of each other’s point of view is what differentiates merely talking from truly communicating. Understanding another’s differing perspective does not mean or require agreement with that perspective. However, communication, i.e., understanding each other’s differing perspective, more often than not opens the collaborative imagination of both and results in the creation of mutually acceptable arrangements.

There is no better example of the golden rule and communication than Jesus. He had such an important message to share that it might be “understandable” or “justifiable” if He had resorted to yelling, screaming, name-calling, profanity, or other tactics in order to deliver His message. But He didn’t. Even in the face of aggressive and argumentative behavior from others, even those who feared Him, even those who planned His death, He maintained a gentleness of manner and expression. He exemplified the golden rule not only with his actions, but also with his words and his demeanor. He also talked and acted with the purpose that those who saw and heard Him would understand His message, thus His use of questions, parables, and signs. He wanted to communicate His message so that those who heard Him would understand it so well that they could, in turn, pass it on to others. Again, that understanding is the difference between talking and communicating. Jesus didn’t simply preach and assume He was understood. He questioned, listened, clarified, and addressed important concepts from a variety of angles. He also pointed out examples of those who clearly understood His message and understood who He was - again so others might also understand.

Adhering to His rules, i.e., treating others the way we would like to be treated, invites Him actively into the entire process. Through Him, no problem is unsolvable. Through Him, creativity and imagination know no bounds. Through Him, the process and the result are synchronous. Communication in this manner is truly an expression of His love for one another.