

AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO TO YOU

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Genesis 4:1-16; Matthew 7:7-14

In the John Grisham novel and the Matthew McConaughey movie, *A Time to Kill*, there is one of my favorite scenes in all of film. McConaughey plays a Mississippi small town lawyer, Jake Brigance, who is defending a Black man, Carl Lee, a man who has killed two white supremacists who have raped and beaten Carl's daughter, Tonya. The defendant, Carl Lee, is played by Samuel L. Jackson looking very worn down and scruffy, not the kind of person you would immediately find appealing, nor would an all-white Mississippi jury find innocent.

At a critical point in the movie, as the lawyers are making summation arguments, McConaughey's character, Jake, asks the jury to close their eyes, "Go on and close your eyes," he tells them, and then he has them picture a little girl. In slow and painful detail, he recalls the rape of a 10-year-old girl by two rednecks, dragging the little girl on the road by a chain off the back of their pickup truck, urinating on her after they have raped her, all of it reliving the minutest facts of Tonya's rape in lurid and shocking word pictures. He then asks the jury, in his final comment, to "now imagine she's white."

It is a stunning reversal that lays bare the racism that has been a dominant part of this trial but that has not been named as such. Every member of that jury was picturing little Tonya, Carl Lee's 10-year-old Black daughter, not their own daughter. That could never happen to them. Jake Brigance turned the tables on that expectation and made the jury see their own daughter, their own child victimized.

In Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says - among all the insightful, helpful, challenging and comforting things he says - "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." We know this as the Golden Rule, and great grandma used to sew it on a sampler and frame it and put it on the dining room wall. It's so familiar to us that it is one of the few Bible passages we know by heart. "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you."

Tom Long, Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Emory University says the Golden Rule is something of a puzzle for interpretation because it stands at the end of the sermon as a kind of summary comment. But what does it really mean? It's so familiar to us.

Does it mean "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," or does it mean "You get what you give?"

Tom Long suggests the function of this passage in its context is large and encompassing.

When Jesus fishes the Golden Rule out of the stream of popular principle and sets it free in the heavenly sea, it flashes through the water with new and brighter colors. "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" – what does this mean for citizens of the kingdom of heaven? [asks Long] What do the children of God want others to do to them? Or course, they want to be recognized as who they are, God's very own people, and they want to live in a world where mercy, meekness, and peace prevail. So, Jesus now calls them to treat the world in the same way, to treat the world as if it were already restored, as if it were already what it one day surely will be, a place where the merciful God is all in all and humanity is gathered at the great and joyous banquet.¹

"Now imagine she's white," Jake Brigance says to an all-white Mississippi jury in defense of Carl Lee. And is that not another way of saying, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you?"

If any of us are going to do that, we are going to have to get inside each other's skin and thoughts and experience. Especially in matters of race we are going to have to do the impossible. We are going to

have to experience what it is to be whatever we are not; black or brown or Asian. And first we are going to have to listen to the experience of others who are not like us, and yet are very much like us.

We must have some idea of what it's like to be that other person, in the same way that we know what it's like to be ourselves. We can't in everything do to others as we would have them do to us unless we have some idea of how to connect with the experience of that other person.

This week, Barbara shared with some of us on the staff a poignant letter, written by Maralee Bradley who in her own family life is the white mother of an adopted Black child. The article is entitled, "To the White Parents of My Black Son's Friends."²

In the letter, Bradley talks about her concern for her son growing up and getting older in a nation where he is transitioning from being an adorable black boy to a strong black man. The assumptions about him will change, and Maralee, writing her white friends says "I need your help in keeping him safe."

She goes on,

We talk to our son about safety issues. We talk to him about being respectful of police (and anyone in authority), about keeping his hands where they are visible, about not wearing his hood up over his face or sneaking through the neighbor's backyard during hide-and-seek or when taking a shortcut home from school. We are doing what we can to find this bizarre balance of helping him be proud of who he is and helping him understand that not everybody is going to see him the way we see him. Some people are going to see him as a "thug" before they ever know his name, his story, his gifts and talents.

But here's the thing—as much as we can try to protect him and teach him to protect himself, there may come a time when your child will be involved. As the parents of the white friend of my black son, I need you to be talking to your child about racism. I need you to be talking about the assumptions other people might make about my son. I need you to talk to your child about what he would do if he saw injustice happening.

Maralee Bradley goes on,

... white parents, please talk to your kids about racism. If they see my son being bullied or called racist names, they need to stand with him. They need to understand how threatening that is and not just something to be laughed off. If your child is with my child playing soccer at the park and the police drive by, tell your child to stay. Just stay right there with my son. Be a witness. In that situation, be extra polite, extra respectful. Don't run and don't leave my son by himself. If you are with my son, this is not the time to try out any new risky behaviors. Whatever trouble you get into, he will likely not be judged by the same standard you are. Be understanding that he can't make the same mistakes you can.

Be an advocate for this beautiful soul who has eaten at your kitchen table, sat next to your son at church, been at your child's birthday party. He is not the exception to the rule. He is not protected by my white privilege for the rest of his life. He is not inherently different from any other little black boy and ALL their lives have value and worth and were created by God. I have hope that when white parents start talking about these issues with our white kids, maybe that's where change starts.

"Now imagine she's white," says Jake Brigrance to a jury of white folks in a Mississippi county courthouse. And seeing things from the other person's perspective becomes a whole new experience. In fact, it makes it possible at last to "do to others as you would have them do to you." I think in our modern racially charged context, this is precisely what Jesus was talking about.

I've gotten hooked on the television series *This is Us* and I'm bingeing slowly on this series because it is so deep. I'm only on the ninth episode of the first season, so *no spoiler alerts*, please. It's a show about a family in which there are complicated problems. And the story switches back and forth between the events that shaped the characters in the family when they were younger and now that they are adults.

A white couple, Jack and Rebecca adopt a black boy whom they finally name Randall, a child who arrives at the hospital abandoned in front of a fire house on the same day that their biological twin white children are born. They adopt this black baby because they have lost one of their triplets in childbirth and are left with twins. And so begins their story.

One of the twins, Kate, struggles from childhood onward with obesity, and her story winds around how difficult it is for her to be loved and to love herself.

Her twin brother Kevin is an actor, trim and handsome and very troubled, suffering from all the good things that are right about him but that backfire on him.

There is alcoholism in the family. The father drinks too much. In an early episode, the mother Rebecca discovers the identity of Randall's real biological Black father.

That father, William is dying of stomach cancer, and Randall after finding out who his father really is, takes William into his family.

Now don't try to follow all this, its so convoluted and mixed up, like all our lives are convoluted and mixed up.

These characters in the story become accessible, because they are so gritty, so real, and so like our own gritty, real stories that it makes sense that the series would be called "This is Us." Because it's a proclamation that this is the "us" behind the exterior you don't see past. This is the "us" that even though we grew up in the same family, are complicated. And this is the "us" so much alike, and yet so different from who we really are; take it or leave it. This is complicated America today, the U.S., us. It's not Ozzie and Harriet anymore, or Cliff and Clair Huxtable. This is us now.

What I so like about this series is that the problems that each member of the family faces is something we all can understand and feel and have faced ourselves. It lifts us out of the rhetoric of formal, political, categorical catch words like "white supremacy" and "white privilege" and "racism," which until you *feel* it is sterile and intellectual and distant. But of course, racism is something much more familiar, a feeling in the gut, an experience that you ... well, *experience*.

One evening William, the father with cancer is having an argument with his son, Randall, who lives in a gated white community where people don't argue on the sidewalk in front of their houses. And neighbors, an older white couple, see William wandering down their white street where this one Black family lives. And they call the police because he's out of place. The policeman stops and asks William for an I.D. But William wants to know the policeman's justification for asking. Things are escalating. The white neighbors are looking on from the safe distance of their own yard. They know Randall, their neighbor, but not his father, and when they realize what they have done they apologize for calling the police.

William is incensed anyway, an old soldier of the Civil Rights wars, and rightly so. The white neighbors wouldn't see what they did as racism calling the police because Randall and his father were having an argument on the sidewalk in front of their house... they just see it as protecting the neighborhood. But it is racism nonetheless, the assumptions that are made, the calling of the police, the protection of property.

Now imagine they were white... William and Randall arguing in front of Randall's house. Imagine they were white. Don't you see it? It's the assumptions we make, the eyeglasses of race through which we view the world.

I remember Ernest Campbell, the late pastor of the Riverside Church, who used to sit with his wife Joan in the back pew of this sanctuary on the North side. He was lecturing once in the Fosdick Convocation at Riverside and he said that we preachers have to stop using terms like "the poor," "the needy," "the elderly," ... terms that are bloodless and dry and hide the humanity of the ones we are trying to describe. "There is no such thing as "poverty," he argued to the surprise of us preachers listening to

him. “Poverty,” he said, “is personal. It has a story and a name. It is specific. “Poverty” is a woman standing in line with her three kids at the church food pantry on a cold November day, with two empty brown bags under one arm, and a one year old restless and crying and hungry, cradled in the other.” The poor have a name. The poor have a situation said Campbell. They have a story.

So let me say today, for those who’ve been following along, there is no such thing as racism (not as an abstract thing). What there is is a 12-year-old Black child in Cleveland playing in a park with a toy pistol, and the police drive up and shoot him dead because, well... well

There is Treyvon Martin, walking home after school through a gated community. And a self-appointed neighborhood vigilante follows and confronts him... and I don’t know all the facts about what happened next, but I know Treyvon is dead when all was said and done because well... well. And imagine if he had been white.

Kathleen Cook our Nursery School Director pointed out that black girls are affected too. Black girls fly under the radar until something bad happens, or surfaces. They are often ignored due in large part to the “strong boisterous black woman” stereotype and the expectation that they can take care of themselves.” Just think of Congresswoman Frederica Wilson speaking in defense of her constituents in their grief this week.

I don’t know how you solve all the big problems with arm’s length names like racism and bigotry, and white privilege, and how you break down the barriers that separate us. We’re having a conference on Facing Racism November 4th with some great speakers. Maybe you start there.

I don’t know how we get over our sense of white entitlement, those of us who are white. And I am not looking to Washington for that kind of leadership or inspiration anymore. From the top down there just doesn’t seem to be a will or a desire to bring us together, but rather to drive us apart.

But maybe the church is a place where we can reach across lines by listening to each other, by doing simple things, acts of kindness and love and listening that seem impossible in the public discussion.

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” In other words, as much as you are able - connect with the things in one another that are alike, and learn from the things that are different.

“Now imagine she’s white,” says Jake Brigance. Imagine you are her. Imagine you are him... that other person whom you do not know and do not understand, but can, if you have the wit to pay attention.

It may not be the solution to our racial differences, but it’s a start. And I’ve learned that Jesus knows a lot more about these things than I do, which is why when he gathered his disciples he taught them to think of the experience of the other person, get inside the feelings, the story, the life of that other person. And then, in all things, do to others as you would have them do to you.

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¹ Thomas G. Long, **Matthew**. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1997 p. 81.

² From: <https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/talking-about-adoption/racial-awareness/>