

Epiphany 7, Year C

- Yesterday I saw a post online by a relatively new mother who was excited that her infant was about to be old enough to start solid food – and this mother couldn’t wait, because she was a bit of a foodie, and was assuring the world that her child would be eating quality food – not any of this kraft mac and cheese or frozen chicken nuggets business
- This was immediately a source of laughter for most parents reading it who had older children
- In the south we’d just say to that mother, “bless your heart”
- That’s one of those things that just sounds so simple, doesn’t it? Most new or expectant parents have a list of things their children will never do, never say, never eat
- Because it’s easy to make these sorts of rules to ourselves, right? It gets much harder when we realize that there are other **people** involved, even when those people are tiny ones
- Governing behavior sounds so simple, until we add in the complicated variables that are other people
- It’s the same, I think, with this advice from Jesus today
- This key moment in the Gospel, an early part of Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain”
- And the message is something so basic, so almost universally agreed upon, that it seems like a no-brainer
- “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”
- And maybe it would be easy, if we operated in a vacuum – if we just encountered other people who had no effect on us whatsoever
- But what makes it difficult, I think, is that people tend to do such confounding things
- Sometimes they do things that are profoundly inconvenient, like cut us off in traffic
- Sometimes they do things that seem or even are extremely mean, like blowing up at us for events that weren’t our fault or getting angrier than a situation warrants
- And sometimes they do things that are wildly frustrating, like refuse to eat the most delicious dinner that we’ve spent hours preparing for them, demanding instead something a little more familiar, like the reassuring orange glow of Kraft mac and cheese
- What’s even worse, we don’t always know **why** people do the things that they do!
- We sometimes have to guess at their motivation – why would this person cut me off in traffic? Why was my boss so needlessly rude? Why did my good friend seem so unhappy to see me?
- And science tells us we are incredibly bad at guessing people’s motivations! They even

invented a term for it – the “fundamental attribution error” – which says that we tend to assume that the things other people do, especially the things they do that we don’t like, are a result of their character or tell us something about who we are – meanwhile, those things we do that we aren’t proud of are always the result of circumstance

- So when *I* forget where my turn is and have to change lanes at the last minute and slow down in front of someone else who’d been waiting in traffic, it’s because the traffic signs weren’t clear – but when someone else does that to me, it’s obviously because they are a self-important monster
- And so, because we think that when other people do things we don’t agree with, it’s indicative of who they are, of a flaw in their character – it’s that much harder to actually do to others as we would have them do to us, isn’t it?
- Because they’re obviously flawed, and we’re just victims of circumstance!
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- I was all set to preach a sermon this morning about how the golden rule is really about setting an impossible standard – about how the world in which we live is too complicated for this this to be an attainable goal...
- How this impossible standard simply serves to highlight our need for the gift of grace
- I’d venture a guess that Howard, our assisting pastor, would have liked that sermon a lot, it’s a very Lutheran sermon – the law sets an impossible standard, and we need God’s grace in order to be forgiven for failing to meet it
- But that’s not *entirely* true – ironically, it was another Lutheran, former preaching professor and Lutheran seminary president David Lose, who helped me to see that this isn’t quite the whole story
- It is, on the one hand, an unattainable goal... at least, unattainable on our own
- It is an impossible standard, left to our own devices
- But we’re not on our own, are we? We aren’t left to our own devices
- The promise of Christ isn’t merely forgiveness for the ways in which we fall short
- That’s an absolutely essential part of it, don’t get me wrong – after all, we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God
- But God doesn’t just promise in Christ to forgive, to look the other way
- God’s promise is that, in our putting on of Christ at Baptism, we can do better, **be** better
- That in Christ, we don’t have to fall victim to the same shortcomings and mistakes, the same tired old grudges and lingering resentments, the same hostilities and frustrations

and irritations

- In Christ, we're able to turn away from all that and turn instead toward God
- To turn instead toward love and forgiveness and mercy
- To do to others as we would have them do unto us
- In Christ, we're not just shown the fallenness of this world and told that it won't be held against us
- We're shown an entirely new one, one where the old rules don't have to apply
- Where we can forgive as we are forgiven, love as we are loved
- Where we can do to others as we'd have them do to us
- It's an utterly unrealistic goal – a completely impossible task
- But through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ, it can be done