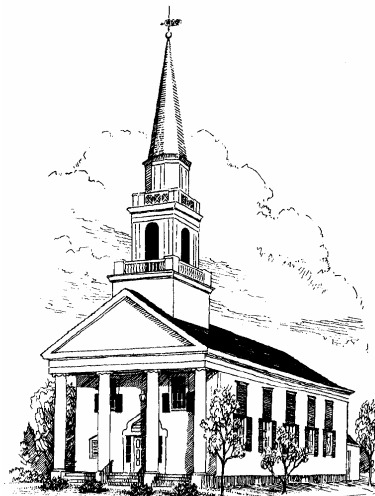


# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut



Message from August 30, 2009

**“No Regrets”**

Jody Capen

Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

Luke 6:27-31

I know how to live a life with no regrets. I actually believe that many of us know how to live that life—a life that is rich and satisfying. The problem is that it’s hard to do—all the time, every day, every minute. It requires tremendous discipline and great effort on our part to live that type of life. It requires a determination to never do or say anything that, upon reflection, we’ll later regret.

The “secret” to this kind of life is to live by the simple, ancient saying which I’d like to introduce by reading a brief passage from *The Spiral Staircase* by Karen Armstrong. In this passage, she is discussing theological ideas with another religious scholar who asks her if she knows the story about Rabbi Hillel who was one of the leading Pharisees in the time of Jesus:

*“You know the story?” Karen Armstrong shook her head. “Some pagans came to Hillel and told him that they would convert to his faith if he could recite the whole of Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg. So Hillel, obliging, stood on one leg like a stork and said, “Do not do unto others as you would not have done unto you.’ That is the Torah.”*

Jesus, as we heard earlier, also taught a version of this saying. Confucius, too, taught this idea explaining that the one word that could serve as a principle of conduct for life was the word *shu*—reciprocity: “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.” From Islam, the teaching is “None of you (truly) believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.”

So, in fact, all of the major and, maybe, all of the minor religions, too, hold this principle as a directive of how to live a holy life. Clearly there is a wonderful wisdom in these simple words.

I believe that living by any of these versions every day, every minute, would make for a pretty spectacular life. But I am intrigued by the version that Confucius and Rabbi Hillel put forth. I think their “take” might be even harder to live by than the more common versions because I think that doing good works, helping others, and giving others what they ask for or what we think they need, is relatively easy to do and self-rewarding.

However, refraining from doing to others what you would not want done to you—to do that well, you need to put yourself in someone else’s shoes and walk a while. You need to exercise self-control, acute awareness, and deep sensitivity to another. And that takes great discipline. It might require new learning, serious consideration, and both time and prayer. To exercise restraint, to not say the first thing that pops into your head, or to do what you’re quite sure is the best action in order to help, is a

selfless response, keyed into the “other”. It is an act of great respect of the “other”.

But if I could live by any version of the Golden Rule every day, every minute, I would be living a holy life. Quite a few years ago, I heard an incredible story that touched me deeply. Apparently, it's been on the internet for years, as almost everything is now. And here's a version that I found.

*Many years ago, when I worked as a volunteer at a hospital, I got to know a little girl named Liz who was suffering from a rare and serious disease. Her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her 5-year old brother who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness.*

*The doctor explained the situation to her little brother and asked the little boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. I saw him hesitate for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, “Yes, I'll do it if it will save her.”*

*As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled, as we all did, seeing the color returning to her cheek. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, “Will I start to die right away?”*

*Being young, the little boy had misunderstood the doctor. He thought he was going to have to give his sister all of his blood in order to save her but he had chosen to save her anyway.*

Giving your life for another is certainly the ultimate act of love. Most of us have never been tested but I'm also quite sure that many days, sometimes more than once in a day, we are faced with choices of how to act where we choose to be generous and compassionate, or harsh and hurtful.

How many of us, when we are talking with someone—a family member, a co-worker, friend of a church member—are not really listening with care because we already “have the answer”? Has there been a time when we become impatient because this other person seems to be going on and on and on? Has there been a time when we are really just waiting for somebody or everybody to just stop talking? I can remember a time or two.

Or how about those times when you are in the middle of a task or just beginning it and someone comes to you with a desire or need to tell you something? Have you brushed-off that person whether with a gentle “Give me two minutes and then I can listen?” or with a more brusque, “Can't you see I'm busy?” instead of making the choice to care, to truly “be present” with that person? Can you remember feeling regret over what you said or how you said something to someone? I can.

Usually (thank God!), when we fall short of living by the Golden Rule, no one dies; and the results don't seem to be disastrous. However, if you put together all the times in a person's life that one is dismissed or treated roughly, they can add up. Small wounds can accumulate and cause significant harm deep within a person's soul.

There's another story that I first read in Reader's Digest years ago. It is quite different from the first story and I want to close with it.

*Little Chad was a shy, quiet young man. One day he came home and told his mother that he'd like to make a valentine for everyone in his class. Her heart sank. She thought, “I wish he wouldn't do that!” because she had watched the children when they walked home from school. Her Chad was always behind*

*them. They laughed and hung on to each other and talked to each other. But Chad was never included. Nevertheless, she decided she would go along with her son. So she purchased the paper and glue and crayons. For three weeks, night after night, Chad painstakingly made 35 valentines.*

*Valentine's Day dawned, and Chad was beside himself with excitement. He carefully stacked them up, put them in a bag, and bolted out the door. His mother decided to bake him his favorite cookies and serve them nice and warm with a cool glass of milk when he came home from school. She just knew he would be disappointed and maybe that would ease the pain a little. It hurt her to think that he wouldn't get many valentines—maybe none at all.*

*That afternoon she had the cookies and milk on the table. When she heard the children outside, she looked out the window. Sure enough, there they came, laughing and having the best time. And, as always, there was Chad in the rear. He walked a little faster than usual. She fully expected him to burst into tears as soon as he got inside. His arms were empty, she noticed, and when the door opened she choked back the tears.*

*"Mommy has some cookies and milk for you," she said.*

*But he hardly heard her words. He just marched right on by, his face aglow, and all he could say was, "Not a one. Not a one."*

*Her heart sank.*

*And then he added, "I didn't forget a one, not a single one!"*

No life was at risk. Nothing will be reported in the paper or go on YouTube but this simple story of a little boy is inspirational to me.

Whenever we live by the Golden Rule, whenever we put others first, any minute, any day, whenever you or I do that, we will be following the words of Jesus: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." And we will be living a life with no regrets. Amen.

