

Exodus 22:21-23:9  
Ephesians 2:8-22

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
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## Sharing: Jesus' Sandbox Rules (for International Relations)

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. *Ephesians 2:14-16*

Apparently it's been fifteen years since Robert Fulghum shared his now famous sandbox rules in his best selling, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Fulghum, a Unitarian minister says he never set out to write a book, so much as he just collected a bunch of newsletter pieces he'd written over twenty years or so. He's the first to admit that it isn't great literature. Some of it, he says, is the literary equivalent of a happy face button. But it struck a chord in the Heartland, often with people who never bought a book before, but after reading it went back and bought five to give away. In one of the essays he gives us his households' "sandbox rules."

- Play fair.
- Don't hit people.
- Clean up your own mess.
- Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
- Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.
- Be aware of wonder. . . .
- Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.

When we teach such things to our children, I doubt if any of us privately expect them be simply interim teachings, good for the 4s and 5s but hardly suitable for later years. I suspect we all hope that they are going to be operative through life. But somewhere along life's journey we capitulate to life being more complicated. (Perhaps because simplicity takes a different sort of self-discipline.) "Play fair" becomes, "Life isn't fair, get over it." "Don't hit people" becomes prepare for war. "Clean up your own mess" leads to a government agency (the EPA) with an annual budget of \$8 billion—the EPA.

We carry so much baggage. On my way to the Farmer's Market on Sunday, the thought occurred to me how absurd would be the notion of color or race to two people of different races who happened to be blind. Imagine also a high level international conference call in which all voices were stripped of accent and replaced by superior quality computer generated voices. How many stereotypes would be stripped of value, and how very different might be the exchange of ideas. Sort of the way God sees all of us, all the time.

Jesus fought for the world to be very different. He hoped for, planned for, taught, and lived out that believing in God is not about a mere interior assent to a noble cause or a badge of respectability. It is about leaving this big sandbox and its people better than we found them. Which means cleaning up our own mess. And having the political courage to say to corporations and other malefactors that if you don't clean up your own mess, we're going to take away your pocket money—which means, shut you down!

Rudy Wiebe grew up in the Canadian outback. He was born in a chicken hut that later became the family homestead. As a Mennonite he cultivated rich sensitivities to the earth and its people, especially to minorities like the Canadian Indian. Among his many writings on literature, which he teaches, and theology, is this call of the heart to people for whom the absorption of culture has displaced sensitivities to faith in God (which is most of us). Rudy Wiebe takes Fulghum's sandbox rules to a new level in terms of Jesus' teaching. He writes:

“Jesus says in his society there is a new way for [people] to live:

You show wisdom by trusting people  
    you handle leadership by serving  
    you handle offenders by forgiving  
    you handle money by sharing  
    you handle enemies by loving  
    you handle violence by suffering

In fact, you have a new attitude toward everything, toward everybody. Toward nature, toward the state in which you happen to live, toward women, toward slaves, toward every single thing. Because this is a Jesus society and you repent, not by feeling bad, but by *thinking different*.”

Let’s imagine them one at a time. First: **“In Jesus’ society there is a new way for people to live.”** Jesus was a radical. He didn’t expect us to conform Christianity to the present culture—which is what has almost exclusively happened, but to transform culture. What almost exclusively happened is that whenever Western nations colonized others, they imposed western values, style, worship, and architecture: the Bund on Shanghai’s riverside, a string of monolithic western architectural artifacts, now looking strangely dwarfed and anachronistic against the burgeoning new city, is a case in point. But as soon as these colonized nations became independent in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity soon began to reject Western forms and take on indigenous expression—except, oddly, for the state run churches in China, and much of world Catholicism.

To get a feel for how variously Christians have conformed or amended or embraced culture over the centuries, you might want to read H. Richard Niebuhr’s now classic book, *Christ and Culture*.

So one question becomes: What would faith and the church look like if Christians like us lived in the world without being shaped by it, but were shaped instead by the life and teachings of Jesus. We’ll take up that story in two weeks.

Wiebe’s second point is, **“You show wisdom by trusting.”** In pre-marital counseling I ask couples what each of them needs in order to love the other. We may talk around it for a bit, but eventually they get it for themselves, every time. It’s *trust*. We cannot love if we cannot trust. It is the bedrock of marriage, indeed of every relationship. And trusting means letting go. Trust means creating a situation in which failure is acceptable as long as it seeks the good of the other. Jesus never expects success. His only expectation is that we make every effort to be faithful. Respect for failure has an enormous capacity to distill wisdom that leads to positive change.

Can you imagine the state of the Middle East and elsewhere today, if Western nations had exported education, infrastructure, agriculture, and the self-development of people, instead of military rule and the monopolizing and export of resources, like the British did in India, China, Iran and Iraq. I suspect that the world situation and international relations would be very different, especially in the Gulf States.

**“You handle leadership by serving.”** Many colleges and seminaries now require students to take a semester or even a year abroad, especially in a culture that’s very different from one’s own. And many seminaries now require candidates for ordination to live among a predominantly other religion. To lead in a global environment without that immersion, or at least contact, is perilous at best. The West can no longer assume that its way of doing things should not be subject to amendment. Servant leadership is epitomized by Jesus’ desire to empower his disciples very early in his ministry, then let them loose, rather than set himself up as the guru. He gave them extraordinary latitude, and on their return encouraged them to come away and rest a while, before asking them, “How did it go?”

**Fourth, Wiebe says of Jesus,** “You handle offenders by forgiving.” There’s a startling passage in Proverbs that we read two weeks ago as Old Testament background to Jesus statement about loving one’s enemies. It says:

“If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat;  
    and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink;  
for you will heap coals of fire on their heads,  
    and the Lord will reward you.” (*Proverbs 25:21-22*)

It has to be instructive that in a penal system that has largely failed to reform inmates prior to their release, the most visibly successful reform agent has been religion. Chuck Colson tells some powerful stories in this regard, blissfully very different stories than those generated by the old Quaker notion that the best way to reform an inmate was to lock him or her up in a small cell with nothing more than a Bible and their conscience, and leave. Still, the

most noticeably successful of all religions in prison fellowship has been, not Christianity, but Islam, which gives people a sense of worth and community.

Fifth, says Wiebe, **“You handle money by sharing.”**

Bill Gates, who retired as Chairman of Microsoft this week, plans to spend his remaining years giving *a lot* of money away, God bless him. However, do you recall a story from the other end of the economic spectrum that surfaced a few years back and made us catch our breath in wonder and admiration. A single, elderly black woman with no children, living in a southern state, spent sixty or so years of her life taking in laundry, going to church faithfully, living a simple life. In short, she lived a balanced life, as one of Fulghum’s rules suggest. She saved what she could of her modest income. Then late in life, it turned out that ever so quietly she contacted a southern university and set up a fund that would give a full four year scholarship to a deserving young woman, for generations to come.

**“You handle violence by suffering.”** Suffering, rightly turned, is redemptive—here and hereafter. Stories abound that time and again turn suffering into blessing, reconciliation, and newness of life of the sort that Jesus made incarnate. I think of the father whose son was killed by a drunk driver—I believe it was in Florida. The father later met up with the young man responsible, came to befriend him, and paid his way through college, bringing about a mutual healing through that surrogate relationship that would seem to have been impossible.

I think of the American couple whose beautiful daughter was raped and killed by two young black men, while she was doing service work in South Africa. The parents traveled to the Cape, met and eventually befriended the young men, and changed all of their lives immeasurably.

I think of the Hindu leader, Mahatma Gandhi, who in the midst of the Hindu-Muslim riots that led to home rule, was confronted by a Hindu man in a tearful rage. “I am going to hell!” he screamed at Gandhi. “Last night I took a Muslim child in the heat of fighting and swung him against a wall and bashed his brains out. What can I possibly do to make amends?”

Ghandi fixed him in quiet determination, and said, “You must find another Muslim child who also lost his father in the fighting, and you must raise him to become a good Muslim.”

Imagine what capacity governments have had, and still have, to do that on a large scale: to inflict peace. Not without cost. But if a life is lost waging peace, might that not have a far more lasting impact than a life lost some other way.

All I know is, these are the challenges Jesus gave us. This was the manner of Jesus’ life. These are the ways, by taking his name for ourselves, that we have pledged to live.

Amen.