

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

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First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

John 15:9-17

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:12 N.R.S.V.)

When the Golden Rule Is Not Enough

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life and your life.

There is a popular series of cartoons making their way on social media these days. The cartoons are called one job fails. One of them shows a yellow line zig zagging from one side of the road to the other. The boss is saying to the paint truck driver, “You had one job . . .” The implication is that the truck driver’s job was to paint the yellow line in the exact center of the road, but he wasn’t paying any attention to that one most important detail.

Another cartoon shows two halves of a bridge under construction, they don’t meet in the middle. “You had one job . . .”

A third cartoon shows a cat and a mouse sleeping side by side. “Cat, you had one job . . .”

Today Jesus talks about the one job that we have to do as Christians. He says we are to love others in the same way that he has loved us. In other words, we are to love others sacrificially.

While none of us would like to have our pictures go viral on the internet with the words, “You had one job . . .,” the truth is that most of us have a very difficult time living out Jesus’ commandment to love each other the way he first loved us.

Part of the problem is distraction. As the old saying has it, “It is hard to remember that it is your job to drain the swamp when you are up to your waist in alligators.” There are lots of things that snap and bite at us in our day to day living. These things can and do distract us from our true calling and work as Christians.

More than that, however, we often fail to follow Jesus’ commandment for sacrificial love because it is hard to do. It is very hard to do and we would rather not.

Many people in our society live by what we might call the “cardboard rule.” The cardboard rule is to “Do unto others before they do unto you.” It is all about loving and valuing yourself. The

cardboard rule might look good for a while but in the end it leads to bitterness and the loss of meaning. Look again at what Jesus says in verse 11. “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

Some people live by the cardboard rule. Many more attempt to live by the golden rule. Even many non-Christians are attracted by the simple grace and beauty of the golden rule. We find that rule in Matthew 7:12. Jesus said, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

The golden rule asks us to value others as much as we value ourselves. Many people can testify to power of the golden rule for joyful living. Yet even when we are trying our very best, many of us don't quite get there. Many years back a fellow pastor in a neighboring church told me about the special surprise service that his church had given him in honor of his 25th year in the ministry.

Everyone was in on the secret except my friend, Bill. The church had invited a bunch of special guests from the Presbytery to be part of the service. They had even gone so far as to print up a fake bulletin just for Bill. Everyone else had the correct bulletin for the day. So Bill got up to start the service and suddenly the organ started playing again and in marched all these people from the Presbytery. Bill later told me that he was panic stricken for a moment, wondering what was going on and what he had forgotten. Someone finally told Bill what was going on, invited him to go and sit with his wife in the pew and enjoy the service.

Bill was far too gracious to ever say this, but I got the distinct impression that Bill was not the sort of person who enjoyed this kind of surprise and that he would have enjoyed the day much more fully if he had known about it in advance. The golden rule would still have worked fine in that case if the people planning the surprise had not stopped with the question, “What would be fun for me? ,” And had said to themselves - what I would really like if I were Bill is for those planning the party to find out whether I like surprises or not and plan accordingly.

For those of us who seek to follow The Golden Rule and find it difficult. It comes then as a shock to hear Jesus say in our lesson for today that we need to go beyond the Golden Rule. Jesus gives us a new rule, let's call it the Platinum Rule. The Golden Rule says value others as much as you value yourself. The new rule that Jesus gives says value others even more than you value yourself.

Jesus says that we are to love one another as Jesus has first loved us. How did Jesus love us? He loved us enough to lay down his life for us. The Platinum Rule is that we are to love one another with a sacrificial kind of love.

This being Mother's Day it is only natural to compare the love of God to that of a good or ideal mother. I do that with some caution because I am aware that not everyone has a good relationship with their mother. I also realize that sometimes even good mothers can be a bit “over the top for us.”

I was reading about one mother whose only son was preparing for college. She wrote the following note to the college president:

“Dear Sir: My son has been accepted for admission to your college and soon he will be leaving me. I am writing to ask that you give your personal attention to the selection of his roommate. I want to be sure that the person he will spend the next few years with is not the kind of person who smokes, drinks, uses foul language or is a troublemaker or rabble-rouser. I hope you will understand why I am appealing to you directly. You see, this is the first time my son will be away from home, except for his three years in the Marines . . .” (Leonard Sweet, posted on Face book, July 9, 2013)

The reason preachers keep going back to the comparison of God’s love to that of a good mother is because for most people it works. Most of us, even those who do not have a good relationship with their own mother, have someone else in their lives - an aunt, a grandmother, or maybe just a friend - who loves them with a sacrificial love.

Garrison Keillor talks about seeing once a picture of his mother along with four other young women. The picture was taken back in 1932 shortly before she met Keillor’s father. He marveled at how fresh and happy they all looked. His mother was willowy, shy and beautiful. He imagined that she could have become a famous movie star playing the village girl who charms the world-weary tycoon stranded in Littleville by the blizzard.

Instead his mother became . . . *a suburban pioneer, making a home in a muddy cornfield, putting up the stewed tomatoes and canned beans every fall, raising six children, slogging through bouts of mumps and flu, whomping up big Christmases, fishing the laundry out of the washing machine and putting it through the wringer and hanging it on the line. Is that what the smiling girl of 1932 had in mind?*

He goes on to say that the cruel injustice of motherhood is that, out of devotion to her brood, she sacrifices so much of her own life that her children grow up to find her a little boring in comparison to the maiden aunt who is a little rebellious and more fun to be around, whereas Mom is just the lady who runs the vacuum. As Erma Bombeck said, the kids walk in and ask her, “Is Anybody home?”

But she loves you. You could come home with snakes tattooed on your face and she still would see the good in you. Keillor goes on to say that most great men were mama’s boys. She encouraged them long before anybody else could see any talent there. (Garrison Keillor, “Nobody loves you like Mama does,” The Old Scout online column for May 6, 2008)

Let me move on here and press the issue a bit. Yes, God wants us to love our children like good mothers and fathers do. More than that, God wants us to love those who are not our children, or our families, or our kind of people. That is a much greater challenge.

Mark Buchanan in his book, *Hidden In Plain Sight*, tells about a time when he heard his son come in, slam the door, run to his room and start crying. He went to see what was going on. Apparently his son and some friends had been playing road hockey. His son was the goalie and

had let a rash of goals be scored. His so-called friends had started making fun of him, called him names, and suggested that he just go on home. They would do better with an empty net.

That was not something a father wants to hear. Mark says he was enraged. He started putting on his shoes to march down the road and call those boys to account. No one treated his son that way!

It was then that he heard an inner voice. “Mark,” God said, “where are you going?”

“To straighten this matter out, Lord,” Mark answered. “No one treats my son that way.”

“You have a father’s heart,” God said.

“Yes!” said Mark.

“You hate it when someone hurts one of your children.”

“Yes!” Mark said again.

“I hate that, too,” God said.

Mark suddenly thought of a man he worked with, one that was getting on his nerves to the point that he was planning ways to get revenge on this man, maybe make him lose his job. Mark suddenly saw this man in a whole new light. This man that he was starting to hate, was also God’s son.

Living out Christ’s kind of sacrificial love is difficult that is true. Don’t lose heart, however. I invite you to look back at our text. Notice that Jesus actually gives two commands. The first thing he says is, “Abide in my love.” That’s in verse nine. Only then does he say in verse 12, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

In the illustration above, Mark Buchanan was able to hear God speaking because he had spent time being in God’s presence and experiencing God’s love. The more that we abide in God’s love, the more we are able to channel that sacrificial love in our actions.

Listen to the words of Jesus once again, “As my father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.’”

Amen.