

“THE PLATINUM RULE”

St. John’s Presbyterian Church – August 7, 2022

Scripture: I Corinthians 13:1-13; John 13:34-35

I am honored to be your guest preacher this morning. Thank you to Jim Little and the Worship Committee for extending the invitation to pinch hit for Patrick. Jim asked if maybe I could pull an old sermon out of the “hopper” since I only had a handful of days to prepare for today. Honestly, when I look at my past sermons, I see they were written at a particular time with a particular emphasis that isn’t always relevant anymore. But I’ll be honest and tell you that my message this morning is a newer version of an old sermon, one that hopefully I didn’t preach here before. That said, I have a strong belief that God’s word is a living word and how God speaks to us through scripture today is not necessarily the way God spoke to us in the past, or the way God will speak to us tomorrow. God’s word is alive! So, when we preach God’s word or teach God’s word or study God’s word, I believe we always need to be open and ready for that word to speak to us in new and fresh ways.

Which brings me to this morning’s scripture reading. 1st Corinthians 13 might be the most familiar passage in the Bible. Some of you probably have heard it and read it so often you have it memorized and the thought of listening to another sermon about love might not be very appealing. Honestly, I bet Jesus’ disciples felt the same way when he talked about love. In addition to speaking frequently about matters related to stewardship, much of what Jesus talked about and modeled for others in his ministry was *love*. He was asked, “*What is the greatest of the commandments?*” His reply was, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Elsewhere he said, “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ...*” And most emphatically perhaps, he said, “*I give you a new commandment to love one another as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*”

Jesus placed the rule of love above everything else, including the sacred Jewish Law. While the priests and politicians of his day were working the system for their own benefit, setting policies for who was in and who was out in society, administering laws that were unjust, and attempting to legislate morality by limiting freedoms and condemning the practices of certain people, Jesus came along preaching a new commandment about love. He set a new standard, a higher standard for living in the

world as children of God; a standard that says *people are more precious than their practices*. It is a standard that sees *all people* as children of God and loves all people as God loves them --- unconditionally and sacrificially. Jesus' standard of love says that in God's kingdom the weak will be made strong and the strong will be made weak, the last will be first and the rich will be made poor. Jesus' standard for living declares that love is more important than religiosity. His standard says we might be able to recite from memory all the laws and teachings of the Bible, and we might be able to argue about matters of morality from a biblical perspective, denouncing social ills and perceived immoralities of the day, but if we do not act lovingly toward others, "*we are a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*"

I remember reading about two men who were competing in a Bible quoting contest. They could quote word for word any passage in the Bible. The article said that both men were deacons and Sunday school teachers in their churches. They were seemingly very religious, men of great faith. But, at the conclusion of the contest, the man who lost pulled out a gun and shot the man who won! That actually happened! And, sadly, similar things like that happen all the time! Not necessarily with guns, but just as harmful with words and actions --- people of faith shooting one another rather than loving one another.

Let's ask ourselves a question this morning. *Do others know we are Christian by our love?* I can think of a lot of people who are "sugary sweet" on the outside, but inside they are sour, arrogant, irritable, prejudiced, rigid in their beliefs and unbending in their ways. They say they "*love*" the Lord, and I don't doubt that for a minute. But *loving* the Lord and *following* the Lord are two different things. Jesus commands us to *follow* him, and that means to love one another as he loves us and as he loves others. It's called *The Platinum Rule* of faith. There is no higher standard. We are under orders from Jesus to love as he loves. And how is that?

First, **JESUS' LOVE IS PATIENT!** And ours should be too!

Maybe you have noticed that we are not very patient people these days? We want instant solutions and instant answers. We want instant remedies and instant service. We want traffic lights that will change quicker and food service that will serve faster. We want diets that will take pounds off overnight, exercise programs that will get us into shape in days, investments that will grow in leaps and bounds in just a few months, and . . . we want short, sweet sermons that will make us feel good and get us out of

church quickly. Someone has correctly asked, *“How can a society that exists on instant mashed potatoes, packaged cake mixes, microwaveable dinners, instant digital pictures, and instant text messaging teach patience to its young?”*

One day a father and his son were shopping in the grocery store. As this father and son went up and down the aisles, behind them followed a husband and wife who observed with great admiration this father’s patience with his son. Time and again, as the father pushed the cart close to the shelves the little boy would reach out and grab things and put them in the cart or drop them on the floor. As their shopping progressed, it was apparent that the dad was beginning to grow impatient. The couple following behind could hear the father saying, *“Just be patient, Tim! We’re almost finished, Tim! Just hang in there, Tim!”* When they arrived at the check-out counter, the woman and her husband approached the dad and said, *“Excuse us sir, but we have to tell you how impressed we are with your remarkable patience while you shopped with your son, Tim.”* Taken back a bit, the father replied, *“Well, thank you very much, but my son’s name is Billy. I’m Tim!”*

How do we teach patience to our young? We model it the way the father in the grocery store modeled it for his son. We model it by *practicing* patience when we shop, and when we drive, and when we’re waiting for our food to arrive at a restaurant, and when our flight is delayed, and when we wait for an extended time at the doctor’s office. We model patience by controlling our anger and consciously treating other people with dignity and honor, no matter who they are or what differences we have with them. We model patience by actively listening to one another without judgment or condemnation. Patience takes practice. Psychologists say that practicing patience is an act of self-compassion. It is a way of treating ourselves compassionately, thus helping to improve our health.

Jesus modeled patience. Like God, Jesus was patient and kind, slow to anger and abounding in love. His patience was evident by his acceptance and love for sinners as well as saints, for the lost, the lonely, the neglected, and the marginalized people of his day. He modeled patience by humbling himself and becoming a servant to others, refusing to exhibit arrogance or pride, and remaining non-violent in the face of threats and even death. Jesus’ example of patience was appealing to people because it stood in vast contrast to the “proud boys” of his day, the religious and political leaders who were arrogant and angry about the progressive teachings and actions of Jesus that were

threatening their superiority and supremacy. And whereas Jesus practiced patience with these enemies, they moved quickly and aggressively to eliminate him.

Brian McLaren is a pastor, theologian, author, speaker, and activist whose new book just came out entitled, Do I Stay Christian: A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned. These are the opening words to his book: *“Nobody is born a religious jerk. It takes a religion to help someone become that way.”* He goes on to say: *“Our religion can “hell-ify” us by inspiring in us an impenetrable sense of rightness or even superiority. That sense of rightness can inoculate us against humility, infusing in us an excessive confidence or addiction to certainty that keeps us from seeing our mistakes until after the harm has been done – to others (including our children) and to ourselves. Our religion is right, we believe, which makes us right. As a result, the more devoted we are, the more stubborn and unteachable we become. And everyone can see it but us because we are blinded by our sincerity and zeal.”*

Do others see in us the love of Jesus by our patience and understanding toward others? According to the apostle Paul, patience is one of the *“fruits of the Spirit.”* It is a quality that ought to identify us in a positive way as a follower of Jesus. Like all the other “fruits of the Spirit,” patience stems from the root of love. When we love as Christ loves then we are patient with others, with ourselves, and with God.

Will you join me in trying something this week? In our homes, our places of work, our schools, our civic and social gatherings, and as we go about our daily business, *let’s practice being more patient.* When we’re driving and get behind someone who is going slower than we want to go, let’s talk to ourselves and say, *“Be patient!”* In the checkout line at the grocery store, when the line isn’t going as quickly as we want it to, let’s tell ourselves, *“Be patient!”* With our children who crave our attention, not realizing our need for some “down” time, let’s make a conscious effort to say to ourselves, *“Be patient!”* And, in our prayer life, as we ask for God’s help, guidance, wisdom and strength, let’s say to ourselves as we wait for God’s response, *“Be patient!”* Let’s remember, as followers of Jesus we are to live by a higher standard, *by The Platinum Rule*, which is the rule of love. And love is patient!

Secondly, **JESUS’ LOVE IS KIND!** And again, ours should be too!

Many people say that the thirteenth chapter of 1st Corinthians is their favorite scripture passage. It certainly is one of mine. Do you know why the apostle Paul wrote

these words to the Corinthians? He wasn't writing to a bride and groom on their wedding day, even though this passage is read at many wedding ceremonies. Paul wrote these words to a congregation of Christians who were not getting along with each other. *Can you believe that?* There was a mean spirit in the hearts and minds of some people in the Corinthian church. There were people who thought their faith was greater than others, and that they possessed spiritual gifts that were more important than others. In short, instead of being patient and kind with one another, Christians in the Corinthian church were being irritable, resentful, arrogant, and rude. The apostle Paul wrote to instruct these early Christians to set aside their differences by remembering Jesus' command to love one another as he loved them. He wrote to remind them, and to remind all of us, that followers of Jesus Christ rid themselves of those things that emanate from a mean spirit.

I'm sure I am not the only one here who believes there is a terribly mean spirit at work in the hearts and minds of many people in our society today. From sports fields to school board meetings to political gatherings to road rage to hate speech to hate crimes there is a spirit of meanness all around us. The lack of civility and air of superiority that exists in many people is so disheartening and frankly, frightening.

I'd like to believe that all people understand and appreciate the need for kindness but honestly, I'm not sure everyone does. Our homes and neighborhoods, our workplaces and schools, our town councils and school boards, our legislative and judicial bodies, our whole world would be healthier and more enriching if everyone was kinder and gentler with each other. I know it sounds trite and even naive, but why can't we be nice to each other, and accepting of each other, and encouraging of one another? Affairs in Washington, D.C. and all the state capitols would be far less volatile, differences of opinions would not destroy relationships among family, friends, and co-workers, arguments between spouses and parents with children would not dissolve into screaming matches if, despite our disagreements, we treated each other with kindness, respect, and dignity. There is far too much meanness in the world today and way too much shouting going on. Too many people believing their way is the right way and if it isn't their way then it's the wrong way. As a result, what we have are homes, schools, neighborhoods, churches, cities, and really an entire world besieged with hate, hostility, and violence.

My friend Tony Campolo, professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University

and a world-renowned speaker, as well as Co-Founder of Cornerstone Christian Academy in Philadelphia, tells the story of Roger, a boy he went to high school with in West Philadelphia. Roger was gay and because he was gay, Tony and his friends would continually belittle the boy. In the hallways they would call out his name in an effeminate manner. They would gesture with their hands and make him the brunt of a lot of cheap jokes. On Fridays after gym class, Tony and his friends would wet their towels and whip them at Roger.

One Friday was particularly brutal. Tony says he wasn't there, but he heard how a group of five guys surrounded Roger in the locker room, grabbed him by the arms, dragged him into the shower, shoved him into a corner, and then began urinating on him. At the end of that day Roger went home and sometime in the middle of the night went down to the basement and hung himself. Tony admits that he still lives with guilt because he failed to stand up for Roger. This is what Tony says, *"I was afraid to be (Roger's) friend. I was afraid to stand up for him because I knew that if you stand up for somebody like Roger, people will begin to say nasty things about you too. And so, I kept my distance, and in so doing I failed to be the loving person that Jesus wanted me to be. If only I would have been loving and kind like Jesus wants us all to be, Roger might be alive today."*

How quick we often are to belittle people, to speak harsh words, to look down on and ostracize people who are different than us, to boldly and blatantly be antagonistic. Rather than speaking an encouraging word to others, we often are much quicker to be discouraging, judgmental, critical, and unkind.

The Bible is right when we read in the New Testament Book of James that *"The tongue is a fire! It is the most evil part of the body. . . It is full of deadly poison. With our tongues we praise God. And with our tongues we call down curses on people. Praise and cursing come out of the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it should not be that way!"* (James 3:6-10)

There is nothing kind about making fun of other people. There is nothing kind about belittling and condemning the practices of others when every one of us has our own fair share of faults and weaknesses. When we do these kinds of things, we are failing to follow the command of Jesus, who said, *"Be kind; be tenderhearted; be forgiving of one another, just as I am forgiving of you."*

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are to live life by a higher standard, by *The Platinum Rule*, which is the rule of love. We are to love as Jesus loves us and as he loves others. His love is patient. His love is kind.

Finally, **JESUS' LOVE IS HOPEFUL!** And ours should be too!

The good news that Jesus proclaimed is that in God's eyes no one or no situation is ever hopeless. There is no person on the face of the earth who is worthless in the eyes of God. And there is no situation that any of us ever faces in which God cannot somehow work for good.

While serving as the President of Cornerstone Christian Academy, I visited with a group of inmates at Graterford Prison, a maximum-security prison outside of Philadelphia. A small group of us from Cornerstone went to express our thanks to twelve men who painted a beautiful mural for our school lunchroom. The Mural Arts Program of Philadelphia chose Cornerstone to be the site for an indoor mural. They run a program at Graterford where inmates work with artists from the Mural Arts Program to design and paint murals on large pieces of parachute cloth which are then installed, like wallpaper, in various places around the city.

While I was sitting in the room with these men, I couldn't help but wonder why they were in prison. I was deeply moved by the graciousness of these men. They were overjoyed that we came to personally thank them. They were especially grateful for the opportunity we gave them to paint a mural for the students Cornerstone serves in southwest Philadelphia.

After I stood up and thanked the men for the gift of the mural, one of the inmates came to the front and said, *"This was a special project for us. We never did anything for a school before and at first, we weren't sure we wanted to do it. But then we all realized that this was maybe the most important mural we were ever asked to paint because it was going to be for kids who live in the same kind of neighborhood we lived in. And we wanted to send a message to tell your kids. We don't want what happened to us to happen to them. So, this painting is from our hearts, and we hope it will help to keep the kids who go to your school inspired."*

As I left the prison that evening, I started reflecting on the fact that here are a group of men that society pretty much views as having little value and yet what an incredibly powerful way God is using them to convey messages of faith, hope and love.

In addition to blessing the city with beautiful pieces of art, what the murals painted by these prison inmates show us is that no one in this world is worthless, especially in the eyes of God. And no situation is so bad that God cannot somehow work for good. I don't want to deify the prison artists I met that night. They are doing time in jail because of their criminal actions. But, seeing what they are doing with their lives makes me stop to think about what I am doing with my life to help make this world a more beautiful, loving, peaceful, and hopeful place.

Here's something to consider as we come to the Table of our Lord this morning: *Are we simply doing our time here on earth, or are we making our lives count for something more? By our words and by our actions, are others around us witnessing the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? **Do** others know we are Christian by our love?*

As followers of Jesus, we are to live by a higher standard, by *The Platinum Rule*, which is the rule of love. We see in Jesus what that love looks like. *Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is hopeful.* It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends. Faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love.