**Platinum Rule**

**First Presbyterian Church**

**Pittsford, NY 14534**

**May 10, 2015**

**6th Sunday of Easter**

**Lectionary Passages:**

**Acts 10:44-48**

**Psalm 98**

**1 John 5:1-6**

**John 15:9-17**

On Tuesday, Bill and I will celebrate fifteen years of marriage. I know that pales in comparison with Tom and Judy Hughes who recently celebrated 65 years of marriage, but I give thanks for the miracle of God putting Bill in my path or God bringing any two people together who want to commit their lives to one another. When couples ask me to officiate their wedding worship services, it is a joyous occasion. Together, we undergo a period of mutual discernment to think theologically, biblically, and practically about marriage and how the process of becoming married will change their relationships. We then talk about practical choices like scripture, music, readers, attendants, unity candles, photographer, videographer, flowers and even rings. I love talking about rings because it gives me the chance to talk about the Great Commandment that has come to be known as the Golden Rule – you know, do unto others as you would have them do unto you – and the Platinum Rule. Wait, I can tell by some of your expressions that you haven’t heard of the Platinum Rule. Maybe you’ve heard of the wooden nickel rule: do unto others before they do it to you. The Platinum Rule is the commandment Jesus gave his disciples in our text today from John 15 saying, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jesus has loved us with an extraordinary love and then Jesus commands us to love one another with that encompassing love. That love is one that loves and values the other person and the relationship as much, if not more than, we love and value ourselves. What does that love look like in our day-to-day surroundings?

The agape love to which Jesus calls us accepts others ‘just as I am without one plea.’ The agape love to which Jesus calls us is ‘love divine, all loves excelling.’ The agape love to which Jesus calls us gives ‘peace like a river.’ The agape love to which Jesus calls us is ‘amazing grace.’ Paul writes that in Christ we are no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.[[2]](#footnote-2) The unity we have in Christ reflects the paradoxical relationship that God has with God’s own self as set forth in the Creation account of Genesis 1. Gen 1:26a says “Then God said, let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” Building on the scholarship of Walter Brueggemann, I want to suggest that being made in God’s image means we are made to be in relationship with one another and with God just as God is in relationship with God’s self.[[3]](#footnote-3) Why else would the Hebrew translate (be sal me nu) as OUR image and (kid mu te nu) as OUR likeness?[[4]](#footnote-4) God’s multi-faceted, multi-dimensional selves were present before creation and God was in relationship with God’s self. God made us in God’s image – as one of a multitude. And God made us in God’s image to live in life-giving relationship with this multitude around us.

Both ‘in the beginnings’ – in Genesis and in John – affirm this idea that we are created to be in relationship just as God is in relationship with God’s self. John 1 says, “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being.” He was in the beginning with God – Jesus was there. And we thought being made in God’s image meant we had opposing thumbs and self-awareness.

Since we are made in God’s image, God has enabled us to live by the Platinum rule of which Jesus speaks in today’s gospel. Loving one another as Jesus has loved us is quite a high standard – higher even than doing unto one another as we would have them do unto us. If we wonder what Jesus means by this Platinum Rule, all we have to do is look at the timing and context in which he gives it to the disciples and to us. He's to be betrayed by one of his disciples that very night. Most of the rest of them are going to run away, as soldiers take Jesus to be tried, flogged and crucified. And the apostle Peter -- upon whom Jesus says he will build his church- will deny him three times. It seems like a sorry and sordid group of so-called friends whom Jesus is calling upon to love him and to love each other. Yet, the important point, I think, is that Jesus is calling upon them for a new kind of love beyond the Golden Rule. He's calling for a kind of love for which one is willing to die, and at first his disciples don't seem to be up to it. Most of us can probably identify with their sentiments!

Jesus has so loved his friends, and so radically acted out his love in the world, that he's about to be crucified as a threat to the Roman empire, not to mention to the religious establishment of his day. This is the man who, just days before his Last Supper, rode into Jerusalem to the enchantment of crowds waving palms and shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord -- the King of Israel." Jesus overturned the moneychangers' tables in the temple, saying that they had made the most sacred place in Israel a den of robbers. He cured the blind and the lame. He preached against the scribes and Pharisees, calling them hypocrites, claiming they lock people out of the kingdom of heaven, and on earth neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and good faith. He said that the mighty will be brought low, while the lowly hungry should be fed, the thirsty be given drink, the stranger be welcomed, the naked be clothed, the sick be cared for, and the prisoners be visited. These were brave and powerful words and actions then. These are brave and powerful words in today's war-torn world as well, and when we think, for example, of how the mighty have treated those incarcerated in the prisons of Iraq or Guantanamo. Jesus saw all that he said and did as a expression of true love. That's what he expected of his disciples, even though it put them at risk of their lives. And that's what he expects of us as well.

Perhaps one of the best modern exemplars of this new commandment of love was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He lived and died trying to manifest the radical form of love to which Jesus has called us. Remember how he put it in the sermon he delivered the very night before he was assassinated: "Now we're going to march again... For when people get caught up with that which is right, and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory... We need all of you... Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness... The question is not, 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?' [The question is] 'If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them? ... [When] I got into Memphis...some began to...talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our white brothers? ... Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will... I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

King said more than once that we're not fully alive until we've found something for which we're willing to die. In his book The Strength to Love he directly confronted the fear of death, quoting the First Letter of John: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear." He explains that "The kind of love which led Christ to a cross and kept Paul unembittered amid the angry torrents of persecution is not soft, anemic, and sentimental. Such love confronts evil without flinching..." Looking at the arms race of his day, though, designed to ease fear through strength, he wrote that "Not arms, but [only] love, understanding and organized goodwill can cast out fear.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Now, the reality is that most of us are not Martin Luther Kings. How can we, realistically, in our own daily lives, understand and practice the new commandment of love of which Jesus was speaking? Well, today is Mother's Day. There's mother love. Most mothers I know say that they love their children so deeply and fully that unquestioningly in an instant they would give up their own lives to save one of their children's lives. Many fathers say that too. So, there's a multitude of parents whose love is so strong that they are willing to die for another. They meet King's test of being fully alive.

I recently conducted a wedding in which the bride and groom asked that today’s passage from John's gospel be read. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." When I ask couples like the Hughes who have been married for a very long time how they found such great longevity, they tell me that the joy of being married will be complete only when we can call each other true friends, and when we are ready to lay down your lives for each other. Being fully alive, fully committed, and fully fulfilled in a marriage entails the willingness to give up one's life instantaneously and unquestioningly to save our spouse's life. With that understanding, we now have children and spouses as a set of people for which many of us ordinary non-Martin Luther Kings would be willing to give up our lives. So, it seems as if we're over the threshold for Jesus' Platinum Rule.

What about friends who are not family members? When I was a child I remember being told the story of Damon and Pythias, two friends in the Sicilian city-state of Syracuse in the fourth century B.C. Pythias spoke out against the king, who ordered him executed for treason. Pythias asked permission to go home long enough to say goodbye to his wife and children and put his household in order. His friend Damon instantly volunteered to be imprisoned until Pythias returned, and to be killed himself if Pythias didn't show up on the execution date. As the fatal day approached without Pythias having returned, the king came to the prison to sneer at Damon and to see if he was sorry for having made such an arrangement. "You were a fool to rely on your friend's promise," scoffed the king. "Did you really think he would sacrifice his life for you or anyone else?" Damon simply replied, "He is my friend. I trust him." As Damon was being led out to be executed on the crucial day, Pythias suddenly appeared, breathlessly exclaiming, "You are safe, praise the gods. My ship was wrecked in a storm, and then bandits attacked me on the road. But I refused to give up hope, and at last I've made it back in time. I am ready to receive my sentence of death." The king was so astonished and moved that he revoked the death sentence out of respect for their friendship.[[7]](#footnote-7)

So, if any of us have these kinds of friendships, our set of people to fulfill Jesus’ Platinum Rule of love may now include children, spouses and close friends. Our challenge, then, is to keep expanding the circle to take in more and more other kinds of people. Jesus' commandment becomes aspirational and inspirational. Will we be ready to follow a new Martin Luther King, who calls us to love even our enemies unto death? Will we be ready to put our lives nonviolently on the line, without fear, to promote peace and justice for all?

Professor Huston Smith has written a best-selling book on The World's Religions which has chapters on Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity, among other traditions. As he examines Christianity comparatively with other religions, he finds that its unique contribution, the essence of its "good news" has been this Platinum Rule - a new and different kind of love as preached and practiced by Jesus, and ultimately by many of his followers. As Smith writes, "Conventional love is evoked by lovable qualities in the beloved, but the love people encountered from Christ embraced sinners and outcasts, Samaritans and enemies. It gave, not prudentially in order to receive, but because giving was its nature." Smith points out that this kind of love dramatically reduced Christians' fears, including the fear of death. It also released Christians from the crippling confines of ego. They were freed to find the joy of their full selves after letting go their small, everyday selves.[[8]](#footnote-8)

I hope each of us are able to leave this church today and celebrate Mother's Day, recognizing how wide and deep mother, father and parent love can be. I hope each of us are able, or have been able, to have some life experience with a partner to whom we are committed unto death. I hope each of our lives has or will include at least one friendship at the Damon and Pythias level. And then, I hope each of us are able to follow in Jesus' footsteps, building an expanding circle of self-sacrificing love which includes the hungry and the thirsty, the alien, the homeless, the sick, and the imprisoned. For it is only by a willingness ultimately to lose our lives in service to others that we will ever truly find our lives.

1. John 15:12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Galatians 3:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Walter Brueggemann. *Genesis: Interpretation Commentary Series* (Louisville, KY; Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 29-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart, Germany:Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I See the Promised Land," a sermon delivered on April 3, 1968, at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee and reproduced in James Melvin Washington, A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 281-282, 284-286. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Martin Luther King, Jr., The Strength to Love (1963), as excerpted in Washington, Testament of Hope, pp. 509, 513. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. "Damon and Pythias," as told in William J. Bennett (ed.), The Book of Virtues (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 306-311. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Huston Smith, The World's Religions (Harper: San Francisco, 1991), pp. 330-335. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)