

SERMON FOR 6th Sunday in Easter 6.5.18  
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD  
Rev Jordan Greatbatch

The great Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once playfully said ‘The Golden rule is that there are no golden rules.’ Despite his insistence, today’s passage has come to be known as the ‘Golden Rule’.

This Golden rule is one of the most well-known teachings from the bible. If you ask most people who may have no Christian experience, they would usually be able to articulate that teaching from Matthew “Love your neighbour as yourself”. It is also a saying that seems to be present in other religions. In Buddhism, there is the saying

“Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” Moreover, in Hinduism it is “One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one’s own self.” There are many more examples of what has become regarded as a universal principle, a mark of good human relationships. Is it however, worthy of the name ‘the golden rule’? I was in a small group A few years ago where this ‘golden rule’ was being discussed, and someone stated that to them, the golden rule did not go far enough. At the time, it struck me as a strange thing to say. Surely, this golden is the key to Christian love and ethics, but as I read today’s passage, my mind kept jumping back to that persons statement and the fact that in this passage Jesus also seems to be challenging the notion of the ‘golden rule’.

I say this because in John, Jesus seems to be going further than just saying love one another as you love yourself, but shifts the focus that *his* style of love is the kind that should be emulated. The danger with the golden rule it seems is that you may not treat yourself very well, you may judge yourself harshly, you may think you're not worthy of love, and you may view others in the same way.

It seems in this particular passage Jesus sets the bar of reciprocal love to what he would deem as the willingness to lay one's life down for another. I don't know about you, but that makes me get very nervous, because if that is the mark of love, I fall extremely short. Nevertheless, should we be nervous? How are we to exercise such love in a context where laying one's life down for another has no relevance?

The tricky thing about preaching from the Gospel of John for me is the fact that context plays such a huge part. Studies of John over the past century have illuminated the idea that the gospel was written to a community at the end of the first century who were facing expulsion from the synagogue and it seems, the threat of death. Its members were probably facing the reality that they may have to lay their lives down for each other. This was serious stuff. If you try to picture yourself in that context, then this teaching from Jesus would strengthen you with an immense resolve and comfort you in your sorrows. It highlights the immensely powerful way that scripture, speaks throughout the ages, what it may mean and invoke to one group in the first century is completely different to what it may invoke to us today.

So what do we do with this command? To love each other as Christ has loved us. I feel that it draws us deeper into contemplation of God's love. We are no longer servants says Jesus, we do not approach God grovelling in fear as one who must tread carefully, but rather we are embraced as friends. Friendship is one of the most profound human experiences. It speaks of vulnerability, a choice to love one another, with the prospect that the love may be rejected. It speaks of trust, it speaks of all that is good about humanity. I recently went on holiday and stayed with some friends who I meet in my first year at high school, almost 14 years ago. I don't see them very often as they now live in Australia, but when we do get together it is like we never left. I know them so well, that we don't have to see each

other for years at a time, but when we connect again, our conversation is rich and our love and affection as strong as ever. My hope is that in my walk with Christ, I will have such a relationship. Not a love produced from fear, but from affection for what one offers the other, a love that is not easily broken.

However, though I say not easily, there is always a danger even in this kind of love. C.S Lewis, writing on friendship makes the point that friendship has its dangers. He states "We can be let down by our friends, and friendship can form around a shared evil or hatred, as easily as a shared good. Because friendship is a spiritual love, the danger that affects it is spiritual too. The danger that friendship has a tendency to cause corporate pride. One is honoured to be part of the

“inner circle”. In the end writes Lewis, “Friendship cannot save itself.” Therefore, we must look to a higher form of love in this passage, not dismissing that Jesus sees us as friends, but revisiting Jesus’ hard command to love as he loved us. In the end, Christian love must always aim for the kind of love Christ emulated, it puts others before itself, it was compassionate and not judgemental, it challenged injustice, but never took justice in to its own hands, it is a model that we know we can never fulfil, but one that inspires us to be better. Moreover, because Jesus sees us as no longer servants but friends, when we fail to live it out, he forgives us and challenges us to always rely on his love, so that we may see ourselves as loved. Because at the end of the day you can’t give out what you yourself have not

received. Receive God’s love, embrace it, and then show it to others, that is Jesus’ challenge to us all.

Amen.