

Sermon by Rev. Anthony Weisman – February 23, 2025

Luke 6:27-38

The Platinum Rule

I know pretty much everybody thinks that all there is to say about religion, about morality, about being a good person, that it can all be summed up in this single verse, in this one line of scripture: “*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*” The Golden Rule. What more is there to say? Right and wrong and good and bad – this is all-I-really-need-to-know-I-learned-in-kindergarten sort of stuff. No reason to overcomplicate things. It’s simple: show some consideration for others, empathize, walk a mile in their shoes, as it were.

Well, let’s take the Golden Rule for a spin and see how we do. Say that – and, of course, this is an *imaginative* exercise; any resemblance to real persons or circumstances is entirely coincidental – say that you are married. And that you can see your spouse is very stressed. Were you them, what you would want, what would make you feel seen and loved and supported, would be a nice shoulder rub.

So you come up behind them in the kitchen and whisper, “I love you,” and start gently massaging their neck. Only, just as you do so, you feel them freeze, feel them totally stiffen up; in fact, your very touch seems to have sent a jolt of tension through their body. And they say, “What are you doing?” They say, “Stop that.” And you respond, “Oh. I’m sorry. You seem so stressed. I thought this might help.” And they snap, “You know what would help? If you would – I don’t know – unload the dishwasher or take out the trash. If you would once, *just once*, see something that needs to be done and do it and not wait for me to do it, or for me to ask you to do it and then sulk around as if you’ve been nagged to the point of persecution or something. *That* would help.” I don’t know what else that is if not a Golden Rule *fail*. You have done to your spouse as you would have your spouse do to you. But where did that get you? The doghouse!

It turns out that, in addition to the Golden Rule, we might also want to consider what some call the “Platinum Rule”: Do to others what *they* would have you do to *them*. Treat others not as you want to be treated; treat others as *they* want to be treated.

Sticking with the example of showing care (or *trying* to show care) to a stressed-out spouse – You’ve probably heard of the “five love languages.” The big idea is that what looks and feels most like love to one person is not necessarily the same as what looks and feels like love to another person.

We speak different “love languages.” Love can communicate itself through words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, physical touch, or acts of service; those are said to be the five “love languages.” Most of us prefer one to the others. Most of us have, you could say, a first language, a first “love language”, a native “love language”. Your “love language” might be physical touch; that’s what makes you feel most loved. But your spouse’s “love language” might be acts of service; you can keep rubbing their shoulders all you want, it’s just that they will likely experience this not as love, but as an annoyance. If we really want to show them love, we will

have to grow to be more “fluent speakers” of their love language. Ideally, if the love you share is really love and is really shared, they will do the same. That’s what the “Platinum Rule” looks like in practice.

Let’s take a tougher test case. Some of the conversations, the hard and intractable conversations we have in our country about race and racism – it seems to me that they are being had by people who, on the one side, hold to a Golden-Rule-morality, and who, on the other, are maybe more Platinum-Rule-minded. There are people, almost all of whom are wrapped in white skin, who think about our society’s moral obligations to their Black neighbors in terms of what *they* would need or want or expect were they them, that is, were they themselves Black and not white.

They imagine what it would be like to experience discrimination and unfairness and prejudice, and they imagine what remedies they would be helped by. And I want to say: I *do* believe that these people are moral people, are deeply empathetic people. They are not bigoted monsters. They are simply “doing” morality and empathy and thinking about race and racism in a Golden-Rule way: They are standing in their own experience. They are starting from their own experience. They are trying, often trying heroically, to step outside of their own experiences.

But the gravity, the sense of gravity, in the kind of moral reasoning and moral action that the Golden Rule calls us to – it is a self-ward sense of gravity: Do to others as *you* would have them do to you. The self, the self even that *wants* to look and reach beyond itself, is still at the center. Many Black Americans say that racism so thoroughly shapes their world that their white neighbors, however well-meaning they may be, simply cannot, can never, fully imagine their way into the experience of a Black person.

The unfairness they live with is beyond what those who have never experienced it can fathom. There is an empathy gap that will be, in the end, uncrossable. And so, “do to others as you would have them do to you” can only take white people so far here. It would be better, many Black Americans say, to adopt a “do to others as they would have you do to them” approach to the moral questions which arise as we wrestle together with issues of race. Live by the Platinum Rule. Let the other person, not the self, but the other person in all of their different, stubborn, maddening other-person-ness be at the center of how you think about these things. Let Black Americans stand in their own experience and speak from their own experience. Listen to them. And be open to the possibility that their experience, their truly unimaginably different life experience, has taught them things which may not make much sense to those of us who haven’t been through what they’ve been through.

Like love in a marriage, what feels like fairness to one person may not feel like fairness to another person. It has been said that justice is what love looks like in the public square; so, I wonder if it would make sense to talk about “justice languages,” about different “justice languages” that we are speaking and so often speaking past one another.

I will say that I don’t see how the president’s crusade against “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” or “DEI” initiatives will help us have the hard conversations we *have to* have. I think there is probably cause for criticizing the way some of these programs were run. Surely, as with any human undertaking, there is room for improvement. But the administration has not offered an

accounting of whatever legitimate problems and issues there may be. Nor has it proposed concrete solutions for addressing these problems and issues.

I have heard nothing whatsoever about how the work of these “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” initiatives could be done better. The work of people who have, in good faith, tried – and maybe failed, but who at least have *tried* – to move us forward morally, this work is being criticized and condemned wholesale by others who seem to believe that criticism and condemnation are all that is required of them. They don’t seem to have any ideas of their own about how to make things right; they don’t seem to think they actually have to *do* anything to make things right – it is enough for them simply to point out how stupid and how wrong everyone else is. Is that what moral leadership is?

G.K. Chesterton – as wise and as devout a Christian as they come – has said: “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.” Until someone puts forward a morally serious counterproposal for addressing the reality that race continues, by almost every measure, to be among the greatest determiners of an American’s prospects in life, these DEI initiatives are what we have. They are a tool in a toolkit that I wish had more tools in it and better tools in it. By all means, we should do better. But, again, what we are seeing now is not “doing better.” It’s doing nothing. This is not progressivism. This is not certainly not conservatism. This is nihilism. This is moral nothingness. This is a moral void, a moral black hole at the heart of our common life.

Do to others as you would have them do to you. Do to others as they would have you do to them. Neither is simple or easy or straightforward. They both require a great deal of thought and of thoughtfulness. They both require humility. They both require patience. They both can only take us so far.

Do to others as you would have them do to you. This assumes that what we want for ourselves is a good and right thing to want for ourselves. But I want to win the lottery; and, heck, in the spirit of “do unto others” – I want all of you to win the lottery, too. And yet, most people find themselves destroyed by windfalls like this. This also assumes that we *know* what we want for ourselves, or that we actually want what we think we want. But – and, again, this is a fictional scenario – who among us hasn’t asked someone, oh, say, our spouse, for advice, gotten it, gotten very good advice, in fact, and been upset because what we *really* wanted was just to be listened to and commiserated with?

Do to others as they would have you do to them. This also assumes that what others want is what it is good and right for them to want. It also assumes that they know what they want. And sometimes it is unwise to make those assumptions. The Golden Rule and the Platinum Rule alike can only take us so far. Where they take us – and, thank God for this – where they take us is, in the end, best summed up in these words by the philosopher Iris Murdoch: “Love is extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.”