

## Platinum Grade

John 15:9-17

Today, in case you needed to be reminded, is Mother's Day. And if you did need reminding...you'd better act quickly because the clock is ticking; and the florists and card shops inventories are going fast. Did you know that Mother's Day runs neck and neck with Valentine's Day as the biggest generators of sales for flowers and greeting cards? Which shouldn't be too surprising. Not everyone has a sweetheart, but everyone has a mother. And, in virtually all cultures, the affection of a mother for her children represents the gold standard of human love. The very first sound to reach a new-born's ears is the cry of a mother's painful sacrifice as she brings life into the world. The last word spoken by many soldiers dying on battlefields—the last word spoken by George Floyd dying on a city street—is “Mamma!”

It's hard to imagine a more primal bond than the one shared between a mother and child. Yet, on the last night of his life, Jesus left his disciples with an even greater yardstick of love for them to live by. He told them, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” Jesus wasn't talking about maternal love that is instinctual, or romantic love that is irresistible. What he envisioned was a love that is as much an act of the will, as it is an expression of the heart.

The Greek word that is used in the Bible for the love Jesus was describing is agape. Agape love is not set into motion by admiration, physical attraction or emotional affection for another. Agape love is inspired purely by an interest in the welfare of another that surpasses even concern for oneself, even to the point of laying down one own life for them. The Latin word for agape is caritas, from which comes the English word charity. Charity is giving to the needs of another without any expectation of repayment or reward. If maternal love is the gold standard of selfless affection, agape love might best be described as platinum grade love, because platinum is considered to be more precious than gold.

There are several reasons why the value of platinum surpasses that of gold. The first reason why platinum is more valuable than gold has to do with the laws of supply and demand. Platinum is much rarer than gold. Every year, approximately 1,500 tons of gold is mined worldwide, in comparison to just 160 tons of platinum. By the same token, genuine examples of platinum grade agape love are few and far between. They are the rare and radical exception to the norm.

The second reason for platinum's value has to do with purity. Platinum jewelry is made of at least 90-95% platinum. In comparison, a 14k gold ring is typically only a little more than 50% gold. Likewise, agape love is the purest kind of love there is. Platinum grade love is 100% about sacrifice with 0% expectation of reward. There is not even a whisper of a *quid pro quo* where agape is concerned.

The third reason for the difference in value between gold and platinum is that precious metals are priced by weight, and platinum is much denser than gold, meaning it will be heavier. That certainly is true of agape love. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” Jesus said. But laying down one's life out of love, whether literally or even figuratively, is a heavy burden to even consider bearing. Which is why Jesus framed this willingness to embrace personal sacrifice for the sake of another not of our own flesh and blood, in terms of a command. Precisely because it is neither

spontaneous nor instinctual. It is not something we feel a natural attraction towards doing. Because it defies our natural human instincts, the incentive to love on a platinum scale best begins with responding to it as a commandment to be obeyed. But, it comes with a promise. The promise that God will provide what it takes to gradually transform the pattern of our lives to more resemble the “laid down life” that Jesus lived. Jesus promised that whatever we ask of God as we attempt to live lives of platinum grade love, God will grant us. Not in the way that a genie grants selfish wishes; but as a good parent equips a child with what is necessary for living a commendable life.

Jesus didn't stop with issuing a commandment about agape love, though. He went on to demonstrate how to love in this way by example. When Jesus spoke to his disciples of laying down one's life for one's friends, he was describing something he himself was about to do for them...and for us. By any standard, Jesus' disciples were massive failures as friends. They would betray, deny and desert him. As the old saying goes, “with friends like that, who needs enemies.” If you or I had people in our lives who were as unreliable as the disciples were for Jesus during the final days of his earthly life, we probably would call something less affectionate than “friends.” Yet we hear Jesus say, “No longer do I call you servants, but I have called you friends.” I'm glad he said I have *called* you friends, and not “you have proven yourselves to be great friends.” Because they hadn't. Not by a longshot. And neither do we. Yet he loved them, and he loves us, with pure platinum grade love; no matter how far we fall short of the selfless love that he commanded. He even invites us to experience platinum love first-hand with a call for us to abide in the love he has for us.

Some words hold the power to make you feel good just by the sound of them. For me, abide is such a word. To abide in something is to make it your home. In last week's reading from John's Gospel, Jesus described himself as the True Vine and called on his disciples to *abide* in his love, the way that branches abide in the vine in order that they might bear good fruit. To mix metaphors for a second, platinum grade, agape love, is the fruit Jesus says that he has appointed us to bear.

Does that mean Jesus wants us to be ready to literally lay down our lives for someone else, the way he laid down his life for us? There *might be* people that you would give your life for in a heartbeat. Sometimes, we witness heroic acts of people physically risking and even sacrificing their lives for a complete stranger. But what is more likely to be the case for most of us, is that platinum grade love will mean laying down our lives in another, less literal sense. It might mean sacrificing a degree of the material security I enjoy, in order to be generous to someone for whom basic necessities like nutritious food and a roof over their head are luxuries. It could mean laying down some of the privileges that I have been granted by dint of the place I was born or the color of my skin or my gender, so that others can experience equal opportunities and fewer obstacles to those same standards of living I enjoy.

Jesus is saying, if you want to learn the best way to keep this platinum love commandment --*the only way*--is to make your home in *my love for you*. Settle into this love I have for you, and you might just discover that my way of loving you has the power to transform the way you love others. So, Jesus not sets before us the ideal of loving with a platinum grade love; he not only models platinum grade love by giving his life for us, he even promises that God will give us what we need to obey that command when we faithfully and prayerfully ask for it.

Home (hopefully) is where we learn that we are loved with a gold standard love. And it is where we learn to love others. We don't get to choose the home we grow up in, and some homes model a better grade of love than others. But something we all do have a choice about is whether or not to make our

home in Christ's love, so that we may reflect that platinum grade love he has demonstrated for us, in our relationships with others.

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