

# The Greatest is Love

John 15:9-17

May 6, 2018

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church  
1750 Virginia Road  
San Marino, CA 91108  
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185  
[www.smccpby.com](http://www.smccpby.com) • [smcc@smccpby.com](mailto:smcc@smccpby.com)

All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

In recent weeks we have seen an escalation of violence at the border fence separating the Gaza Strip from Israel. In his book *Blood Brothers*, Father Elias Chacour tells the story of his youth and education. Many of you may remember hearing from Father Chacour back in 2013 when he visited San Marino Community Church. When he was a boy, his family was displaced by the return of the Jews to Palestine following World War II. There was tension over land. Families still had to raise their children and still hoped for a better future for the next generation. Elias was the youngest child. His father, Michael, approached the Bishop and said, “Bishop, excuse me. I have a request also.” He nodded politely with a hint of weariness in his smile, “What is it Michael?” I have a son – my youngest. His name is Elias. He is a good student, and I want to send him to a good school. Please can you help me?” Others present were indignant with Michael for asking for something so personal. They were trying to get their homes back and their land back. But the Bishop smiled and said, “Let me think on this for a little while, Michael. Come and see me before I leave the village.” Though he did not have a proper school at which to send Elias, the Bishop later explained that there was an orphanage near his home. Elias would be welcomed there and the Bishop promised to see to his education personally.<sup>1</sup>

Michael accepted the offer at once with deep gratitude. Though his wife was less eager to send off her youngest son, she eventually agreed. Michael took Elias aside. There was a slight catch in his voice as he explained, “In a few days, we will take you to the bus. You are going to Haifa on the coast to study with the Bishop. This is a wonderful opportunity for you, Elias. You will never have such a chance here in Gish. And there is another thing,” he said pausing. Now his father searches with his steady, serious gaze. “You are not being sent away to be spoiled by privilege. Learn all you can from the Bishop. If you become a true man of God, you will know how to reconcile enemies, how to turn hatred into peace.

---

1 Chacour, Elias *Blood Brothers* (New York: Chosen Books Fleming H. Revell Company 1984) p. 74-5

Only a true servant of God can do that.” Elias could scarcely fathom such an enormous-sounding task. . . At twelve years old, he had never been beyond the hills of his village. <sup>2</sup>

Though the disciples were much older and more mature, I can't help but think that they felt, centuries ago, what Elias Chacour felt that day. They could scarcely fathom such an enormous-sounding task. “Love one another, as I have loved you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit.” It sounds like, “You are not being sent away to be spoiled by privilege, learn all you can – because to become a child of God, a friend of Jesus, you will learn how to love, how to reconcile enemies, how to turn hatred into peace. Only someone who is friends with the living God can do that!”

When I was a young man there was quite a lot of talk about the relative merits of having Jesus as your personal friend. Some felt that it was a bit blasphemous to treat Jesus Christ so casually, as if he were a buddy. Some even prayed rather disrespectfully like, “Hey JC, what up? I've got a tough day today and could use a little help.” On the other hand, some still used archaic language when praying. “Thou are the God of all creation, magnificent in thy glory and beyond our knowing. What are we that you are mindful of us?” Which is it? God as friend or as some distant deity? Is it transcendence or immanence? Is God radically above and beyond our comprehension, or close enough to be called our friend? Well, it's a bit of both according to this text. Importantly, Jesus doesn't so much give us an answer to our problems, he gives us himself instead.

The language we use is secondary. What matters most is that we can know this Jesus familiarly, as a friend, and learn to love others as he loves us. I was so grateful to learn that Jesus was my friend, and as the years have gone by, I've learned how deep that friendship can become, and it has led me to a deeper sense of awe and wonderment, and to the confession, “My Lord and my God!” At the heart of this text of scripture is the confession captured in the old hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

We, too, have been chosen to go and bear fruit, to love others. It is an enormous-sounding task. Jesus never sent the disciples out alone. It was always two-by-two. This task we share together.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Love is central to our faith, and central to our own happiness. According to the Apostle Paul in First Corinthians, “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”<sup>3</sup> We tend to think of love in terms of romance but the ancient Greeks had several words for love: Agape, Eros, and Philos. The highest form of love for many of us is romantic love – that feeling that overwhelms and is the subject of songs and movies. But that idea is a creation of the Middle Ages. Prior to that time, romantic love was considered a misfortune. Love between family members, between friends, love of country, and love of nature — these were all more important. Even the fact that Jesus commands love sounds strange to us. How can you command someone to feel a certain way? Love is not commanded as a feeling but action. And this love has a way of ennobling and enabling human life to become its highest and most desirable form of love.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner”, a strange old man interrupts a wedding party. Despite the guest’s protestations, he insists that he must tell them a story as his penance for a crime committed long ago when he was a sailor. What the sailor actually did was trivial. It happened on a voyage to the south Atlantic. Good weather had turned to ice and fog — an ominous sign. However, spirits were lifted when an albatross was spotted. It followed the ship to the delight of the sailors. When the weather turned, the ship was guided safely through the ice flows by the bird as it continued to accompany the ship. The men took this good fortune for granted. The old mariner confessed to the wedding guests that he shot the bird — for no reason! The other sailors cheered his success but as a result of this senseless killing, the ship was becalmed. After many days of suffering from the bitter cold, and then from heat, and then from lack of water, the men became enraged with the sailor. They hung the dead albatross around his neck to single him out as the guilty party. The sailor now came to hate and curse the dead bird, and despite his own miserable fate and his own stupidity, his penance is not complete. As the days go by, the ship is visited by death. It’s a ghostly ship, as the entire crew dies. The mariner is completely alone. He tries to pray but his heart is completely dry. In his loneliness the mariner begins to watch the moon rising over the water and the creatures of the deep in their beauty and happiness. It is then that a radical change occurs:

“A sprig of love gushed from my heart. And I blessed them unaware.” This

3 I Corinthians 13:13

strange new vision meant that the mariner is finally free to pray. At that moment he is liberated from the albatross, the “cross” around his neck. He gazes at the water snakes moving around the ship and “something welled up within him to which he could only give the name *love* and he suddenly felt grateful for them. Not because they were any use to him, because they were not; and not because he liked them; he found them strangely beautiful but possibly not attractive. The experience was something quite different from this – it was gratitude for their existence.”<sup>4</sup>

The sailor pointlessly killed the albatross. He failed to recognize it as something which existed apart from his own interests. He had seen the bird only from his own selfish point of view. He had seen it as something to shoot just for fun. The whole world existed as something with himself at its center. His point of view was the only point of view. But then suddenly he recognized that the slimy things in the sea existed apart from himself. They had a life of their own apart from any use to him, apart from whether they looked beautiful or repulsive to him. By taking a moment to see everything, not from his own point of view but letting the creatures be independent of himself, brought him the experience of perfect love.

However strange this tale may be and however trivial the act of shooting the albatross, Coleridge has shown us what enables us to have love. Fundamental to the experience of love is the loss of self-concern. It's not to worry about how useful things and others may be, but to pay attention to them as separate centers of reality. We all tend to experience others, not as centers of value in themselves, but as beings in orbit around ourselves. We are the center of our own universe. We do not see others as “good” like God does in the creation accounts. We see others only as part of our own orbit. Like the sailor, we kill the reality belonging to other things. We destroy it, we cover it over by allowing ourselves to matter most. It is as though only *we* really exist. The ancient mariner found redemption by finding his way out of a self-defined world and into a world of other realities.

We tend to love because of the relative value of the other — because they bring that unique something to our lives. But we are not the center of the universe and we are not

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pg 9

the only one that matters. This is the invitation of God in Jesus Christ; to see the world differently and frame the world differently, with ourselves no longer the most important person in the picture. Only then can we love.

All of us have a pressing need to be loved properly. Ironically we all need so badly to be recognized and loved that we, ourselves, find it difficult to recognize others. This is why this commandment to love is so important from our faith. It cuts the nerve of our self-centeredness. We become reconstituted in a world of God's making rather than our own. We understand and embrace God's love for us in Jesus Christ, who calls us friends — not subjects or servants. He loves us as a best friend has always loved us. It is then that we stop seeing the value of others based on what they can contribute to our own happiness. We must see them as unique and independent, of having ultimate value in themselves. It is then that we relate to others completely differently. The albatross around our own necks falls away.

Augustine put it this way: “God gives what he commands and commands what he gives.”<sup>5</sup> This is not love as sentimentality but as real self-giving. “You did not choose me, but I have chosen you to go and bear fruit. I'm giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” Thanks be to God for an enormous-sounding task. We are being sent into the world not to be spoiled by privilege, but so we can become children of God and friends of Jesus Christ, learning how to turn hatred into love. It may just be the key to ennobling and enabling our own lives. It is the hope for our families, and for our communities, and our world. Amen.

---

5 Aurelius Augustin, *A Treatise on Grace and Free Will*, chapt.31, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1510.htm>