

Sunday May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Easter VI

John 15:9-17

“Chosen to Love”

A man in a hot air balloon realized he was lost. He reduced altitude and spotted a woman below. He descended a bit more and shouted, "Excuse me, can you help me? I promised a friend I would meet him an hour ago, but I don't know where I am." The woman below replied, "You are in a hot air balloon hovering approximately 30 feet above the ground. You are between 40- and 41-degrees north latitude and between 59- and 60-degrees west longitude."

"You must be a programmer," said the balloonist. "I am" replied the woman, "How did you know?" "Well," answered the balloonist, "everything you told me is technically correct, but I have no idea what to make of your information, and the fact is I am still lost. Frankly, you've not been much help so far." The woman below responded, "You must be a manager." "I am," replied the balloonist, "but how did you know?"

"Well," said the woman, "You don't know where you are or where you are going. You have risen to where you are due to a large quantity of hot air. You made a promise which you have no idea how to keep, and you expect me to solve your problem. The fact is you are in the same position you were in before we met, but now, somehow "it's my fault."

If you get separated from a group in a crowd of people, do you know what the best thing to do is? Nothing. The best thing to do is stay right where you are and let others come find you. If you start moving around, you're more likely to just miss people looking for you than you are to find someone you're looking for. In that situation, the best thing to do is to stay put and remain where you are, despite many impulses urging you to move out and look elsewhere for help.

The same can be said of our spiritual life. There is a constant pull inside of us to seek out safety by doing good things to make up for bad things, or by trying to find something more certain, better, or more innovative to move our spiritual life forward. But Jesus' direction to his disciples and you and me is that you are safe where you are. Stay put. Remain in God's love. This section of Jesus' words today immediately follows our Gospel from last weekend, where we heard Jesus describe himself as the Vine and that we are his branches.

We heard him encourage us, "The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples" (John 15:5-8).

As Jesus continues with this discourse, he stays on that theme of remaining, staying put. You are where you need to be, because here you are safe. As the Father has loved me, so also, I have loved you. Remain in my love. God has loved you with the same love that the Father loves the Son. It's a complete, total, uncompromising love that sacrifices all things to bring you back to himself. Because that's what our sin did to us. It separated us from God. It divided us from him.

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We could not pray to him, we could not reach out to him, we could not benefit from him spiritually or eternally. We were lost, hopeless, spiritually dead and destined for eternal death in hell.

But then God gave to us the greatest expression of love that one can have: No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends. This is exactly what Jesus did. As we heard two weeks ago when Jesus described his work as the Good Shepherd, we hear again that Jesus' chief loving work, was to lay down his life for his friends—he calls us his *friends!* —to save them. Normally if someone lays down their life to save someone else, it's a limited and temporary thing.

Some incredible examples you may have heard of include.

**Maximilian Kolbe:** A Polish priest who was sent to Auschwitz concentration camp in 1941. When a fellow prisoner was selected to die as punishment for an escape attempt, Kolbe volunteered to take his place. He sacrificed his life to save another man, demonstrating immense courage and compassion during the Holocaust.

**Titanic Engineers:** During the sinking of the RMS Titanic on April 15, 1912, the 35 engineering staff members remained aboard to maintain the ship's electrical power. By keeping the lights on, they helped reduce panic among passengers and enabled distress signals to be sent to nearby ships.

**The Chernobyl Three:** After the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986, three brave volunteers prevented further catastrophe. They discovered that molten nuclear material would melt through the reactor flooring and contaminate water pools below. Their heroism averted even greater damage to the nuclear plant and surrounding area.

The point is that if someone jumps in front of a bullet and saves the life of one person; or dives on top of a grenade and perhaps saves multiple lives. As amazing and self-sacrificial as this may be the people saved, be it one or several, the people saved will still eventually die. Laying down our life for others is always limited, simply delaying the inevitable. Even Lazarus who Jesus raised from the dead, eventually died again.

But this is not the case for Jesus's sacrifice. When he laid down his life for us, his friends, it had eternal ramifications. Jesus wasn't simply saving us from a premature physical death; he was rescuing us from eternal separation and death. Laying down his life paid for our sin. There are no limits to Jesus' love; there is nothing temporary in the blessings that God gives through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Which is why Jesus is so adamant, **“Remain in my love!”** Because to do otherwise would be to jettison all the blessings that God has given. If I let Jesus take a backseat in my life and heart to entertainment, work, family, friends, anything, I jeopardize my remaining in his love. Any time I feel guilt over my sins and try to do something good to make up for them, to earn forgiveness, to work off my debt, I'm running head-long outside of the protective bubble of Jesus' love and thus facing my sin on my own.

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Anything that makes it so you or I do not remain in Jesus' love means that we will face a lack of abundant living and separation as our eternal destination. So, how does one remain in Jesus' love? That's the question is it not?

However, before we can understand this question it's important to remember how we got into the sphere of Jesus' love in the first place. Jesus is very clear that experiencing God's eternal grace has nothing to do with you and it has nothing to do with me; it has everything to do with him. Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." He decided to save us.

Jesus died for us. He sent the Holy Spirit through his Word to create faith in our hearts, which brought us from the death of unbelief to a new life lived for him. Everything that we are or have through Jesus is because of Jesus, not us. We did not choose any of this; he chose us and made it happen. We know the spiritual results of Jesus' work and choosing us. But what are the external results? What is the evidence that Jesus has done all of this for us?

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will endure. We are branches connected to the vine. Branches that are healthy, that draw their nourishment from the trunk of the vine bear abundant fruit. Good works are the evidence of our God-given faith. Good works do not *cause* Jesus' love, but they are an outward expression that we are staying put in Jesus' love. Being in Jesus' love causes his love to express itself in our thoughts, words, and actions.

Jesus says that the best way to express that love, to express our thanks to him in our life, is by serving each other. In fact, showing love to others is the completion of the love Jesus has given to us. "I have told you these things so that my joy would continue to be in you and that your joy would be complete. This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends."

We know that we can't love in exactly the way Jesus loved, right? Nothing we do or sacrifice for someone else is going to get rid of someone's sins. Nothing we do or sacrifice is going to rescue someone from whatever hell they are in. But that's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is not saying to love like he did so that it brings about the same result. That's not only impossible but completely unnecessary—he did it all!

No, when he says that we should love like he does; he speaks about the spirit of that love, the motivation of that love. It is of critical importance that we do not show love to someone to get something in return. We show love to someone just to love them, to sacrifice for them. Laying down our life may not, and in fact most often will not be dramatic, over the top, saving someone's life by sacrificing your own.

We're not likely going to have that opportunity to dive in front of a bullet or on top of a grenade to save someone's life. Laying down your life may mean sacrificing the time that you had set aside for something fun that you were looking forward to, to help someone in their time of need. It may mean delaying something you had planned to do to talk about with someone going through a difficult time. It means using your time, money, energy, whatever, to help someone who has a need.

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By this you show your connection to your Savior. In this you show that you remain in Jesus' love. You can also love each other by doing the opposite. Help your brothers and sisters by telling them how they can love you! Do you need help? Ask for that help! Is there something someone is doing that is causing you physical problems or emotional distress? Let them know so that they can modify their behavior. Having these conversations is not selfish; it's loving.

Do not assume that someone is doing or not doing something to be unkind but talk with them. In doing this, you are loving them because in doing this you are making a need known and enabling them to love you better. Counter-intuitive as it might feel, in this, too, you show your connection to your Savior. In this you show that you remain in Jesus' love.

A natural example of this point can be found by looking at the two seas in the Holy Land. The Sea of Galilee freely receives and gives out water. It has an abundance of life, nurturing many kinds of fish and plant life. The water from the Sea of Galilee is carried by way of the Jordan river to the Dead Sea. But the Dead Sea only takes water in and does not give out. There is nothing living, no fish or plant life in the Dead Sea. The powerful life-giving waters of the Sea of Galilee become dead when mixed with the hoarded waters of the Dead Sea. Life cannot be sustained if held onto. –John Bevere, “The Bait of Satan” Charisma House, 1997, page 12,13.

And this goes beyond your family, beyond your friends, beyond your sisters and brothers in faith. This love, this self-sacrificing love can and should be shown to others. The stranger, the neighbor you don't get along with, the person who seems to hate you for no reason. Your response? Love. Self-sacrificing love. As Jesus had said earlier in this passage continues to apply for us today, “Just as I have loved you, so also you are to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

Remain in God's love that was freely given to you. Remain in God's love by loving like he loves. Remain in God's love because by that love you will be with him forever. Amen.