

## *“No Love Lost”*

*I Chronicles 16:28-34; Matthew 5:43-48*

February 14, 2021

Now, believe it or not, I was actually engaged one time long before I ever met Natalie. I was young and aimless at the time and a “great love” seemed to me to be the perfect medicine for a sorely lacking life. So, wouldn’t you know it, I met someone and it wasn’t very long until I found myself down on one knee, popping the big question.

The engagement, well, it didn’t work out, thankfully. I say thankfully not because she was a bad or deficient person, but rather because we were just so wrong together. Now look, it took nearly 10 years before I met the right one. And when I did, I was able to recognize that what had taken place a decade prior wasn’t love. Not remotely.

One of the great problems we have in America right now is that, just like me way back in the 1990’s, we’ve gotten love wrong. Now, what do I mean by that? We’ve taken a misshapen parody of it and substituted it for the real thing. But you know how it goes, once you get used to something, you just kind of stick with it, rarely questioning if it’s right or even the best for you or others. The status quo is oftentimes a darned hard thing to change.

Take for example Navy men that served in the Second World War. Many of them used to add salt to their coffee. Most people didn’t know why, but the sailors did. You see, the water filtration on naval vessels at the time wasn’t that great. Sure, it made the water drinkable, but it always contained a higher measure of salt than regular tap water.

When you understand that, their adding salt makes sense, doesn’t it? After all, many of them were youngsters when they sailed out into the great blue unknown. Perhaps they’d never drank coffee prior to stepping on board ship but there, amongst older and more experienced crewmates who were guzzling the stuff, they yielded to the social norm and began drinking it themselves. And what did they get? Starbucks Italian Roast made with purified water? Nope, they got coffee with a noticeable tinge of saline.

Well, when you first get exposed to something, it has the potential to set the goal posts, doesn’t it? So, their version of coffee made the right way had salt in it and many of those seamen stuck with it the remainder of their lives. If they were drinking java, they added salt. It was just the way it was.

Now think for a moment. Think about the many ways love is portrayed to us in media. Rarely do we see stories about octogenarians accompanying each other on a never-ending parade of doctor’s appointments just to be with one another. No, more often than not, what we get are these tempestuous affairs with beautiful people necking in rainstorms or some other foolishly romantic place. Well, maybe they’re not all-in rainstorms but you get the drift. In fact, as I watch television and movies more and more, what I see being portrayed as love is that same, wan, incomplete version I was seduced by way back when. There is love involved, don’t get me wrong, but it’s not for the other person, not really. It’s for themselves. That is to say that, like most things these days, we’ve taken something and made it more about ourselves than anything else.

Christian pastor Tim Keller wrote an excellent book called simply, “The Meaning of Marriage.” In it, he enumerates what he sees as the root cause of the dissolution of so many marriages. He opines that what should be the apex of love, Christian marriage fails because the man and the woman have misapprehended the purpose of it. Too often, he writes, the belief is that the other person “will complete me.” Remember that line from the movie? Well, it’s a great line in an enjoyable movie but it shouldn’t be taken as the Gospel truth. Because it isn’t.

For example, “You complete me” thinking often sets the stage for marital problems. Keller, I think rightly observes that when a marriage is forced to bear the weight of personal expectations for happiness, completeness even, then it is burdened beyond what a marriage can withstand.

“You complete me” thinking gets one thing right, admittedly. Love does complete us. But it isn’t love for another person that does it. Nor is self-love what puts the cherry on top of our lives.

One of the things we in America do very well is, sometimes subtly, sometimes with the cacophony of banging cymbals, is to always put the emphasis on ourselves. In a way, America’s altar stands within me, myself, mine and I thinking.

Take for example what made the rounds on social media a few years back. Do y'all remember the Konmari method? Articulated by Mari Kondo, it was initially designed to help people declutter their homes. The rationale went something like this – “Look at an item. If it doesn't immediately give you joy, get rid of it.”

Well, that might be a fine way of thinking when it comes to a busted vacuum cleaner or a n action figure the kids no longer play with but, unfortunately, the Konmari method ended up seeping into other areas as well. I saw a meme once the counseled using the exact same method when it came to people and relationships. “If they don't bring you joy, drop ‘em” it said or something of the like. Friends, believe me is NO way to live a contented life, much less a Christian one. Because, as everyone knows, there will be days that the people you love definitely DO NOT bring you joy. If our life's wisdom tells us to get rid of people then, we've charted a sure path to discontentedness.

In an article in Psychology Today, psychiatrist Dr. Ravi Chandra, offers up this maxim – “*if you want to be unhappy, be self-centered. If you want others to be unhappy, be self-centered.*” It's a subtle way of making a very Christian point. Jesus teaches us in the Gospel of **Matthew 16:25** – “*For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*” What Jesus is getting at here is the heart of the matter, Valentine's Day pun intended. If we're to exclusively chase after the things that bring us joy, that which “completes us,” then we're bound to find ourselves losing as often as we do the Mega Millions lottery.

The problem with self-centeredness is that, ultimately, it doesn't pay off.

So, if it's not self-love that truly makes us content, what is it then? What's the secret ingredient which will see us living our days in satisfied contentment?

Perhaps we think it's love for another person. And while we'd be getting closer to the true source of completeness, we're still a bit shy of the arrow's mark. While loving someone else is, in fact, a preferable option to low-key narcissism, it isn't going to buoy us in the tough times. Not always. Because if the feeling of love or being loved is what sustains us, again, we place upon our beloved a greater burden than any person can bear. After all, who among us is perfect? Who among us has failed to put the seat down on the toilet or forgotten an item or two on our Honey-Do list?

There is, thankfully, something available in this world that does “complete us.” Something that always brings us joy.

What does this is, of course, God's love.

**Romans 5:5** – “*and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*” Did you get that? God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. The claim Paul makes here and the Bible does in other places as well is that God's love is so transformative that it not only “completes us”, it changes us, too. As God's love gets poured into our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirt, it pushes out the brackish, putrid water of self-centered love. We think LESS of ourselves, LESS of what makes us happy. God's love then gives us an ability that we but scarcely had prior – *the capability to love someone other than ourselves*. Deep enough love to be willing and able to surrender every part of who we are in order to help somebody else.

With the love God provides, we are equipped to do the impossible even.

**John 15:13** hears Jesus say this – “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*” And, mind you, this isn't spoken of as some theoretical possibility. Why not? Because it is spoken by the very person who demonstrates that, in accordance with God's will and God's power, it's a very doable thing.

**Romans 5:8** – “*but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” Jesus Christ willingly walked a lonely, abandoned path to the Cross. He did so not to make a point or to suffer needlessly. Jesus took upon himself the sin of the World so that we might be freed of it and its ultimate consequence - death. But look, he didn't do so just for the people that loved God, and there weren't many of them then or now, he did it for all us. All 9of us sinners, that is. The very people a Righteous and Holy God would have every reason to despise.

And make no mistake about it, Jesus chose to lay down his life because of his great, magnificent, unimaginable love.

And it shouldn't surprise us, not in the slightest. For the Bible tells us in **I John 4:16** – “*So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in*

**God, and God abides in him.”**

And, again, these aren't the blithe words spoken by two people who are simply experiencing an infatuation with one another. No, this is spoken about a God who has acted repeatedly in love for us. For all humanity.

Now look, it's always a dangerous thing to speculate about the aims, motivations and drives of our Lord. But I do think it's a fair question to ask, why did God speak those powerful words and call all of whatever this is into being? Better still, why did the Father take the mud of the earth, fashion it into bodies and then breath His breath into us?

Did he want people to idolize Him? No, assuredly not as, as it would turn out, we're not naturally inclined to do that of our own accord as history amply illustrates. No, we'd rather erect golden calves and fall at their feet than to worship the very one who created us.

Did God need a feeling of accomplishment? Well, that would imply that God stood in need of something, a belief that the Bible repeatedly refutes. God needs nothing, not you, not me.

And yet, here we are.

*The only explanation that makes any sense at all is exactly what First John tells us, God is love.*

A few months before Benjamin was born, I was chatting with my brother-in-law who had become through the years more brother than in law. I asked him, "How did you know you were ready for your first kid?"

He looked at me, smiling. Chuckled a little. Then he said to me, "just like every other parent in the world, I thought I was ready." He went on to add "I wasn't ready. And neither are you...not yet. The only thing that "makes you ready" is just to do it, he told me.

Boy was he right. One simply has no concept to grab hold of to understand the totality of effort required in raising a child. I didn't, that's for sure. But I'm limited, finite. I was no more capable of looking into the future and spying out all that parenting entailed than I'm able to do a backflip right here and now.

Ah, but God could. God would've known everything before those creation-bringing words came out of his mouth, separating light from darkness. He would've known of Adam and Eve's impending rebellion. Would've known of Moses' murder, Samson's Folly, Judas' betrayal. The Almighty knew it all, every bit of it from that first bite of the apple down to the little white lie you told just minutes before heading to church.

God knew.

And still, God created.

Figure me a means other than love that makes this come to pass?

My guess is you've come up with the same thing I have. Bubkus. Love is the only thing that makes sense.

And, unlike those kinds of romantic love that we see perfectly depicted in movie theaters or on television screens, it's an active love. A sacrificial love. Which, I realize are all redundancies when you understand love correctly.

And with our children, with our spouses, with our friends, that kind of true devotion, true love isn't that unfathomable. I hope it never ever comes to pass but I do believe I hold the depth of love to sacrifice my life for my children or my wife.

Ah, but would I do so for, let's say, Mike Krzyzewski?

Now, it'll help you to know this about me. Both my parents graduated from Chapel Hill in the early sixties. Some of my earliest memories are sitting beside my Mom and Dad as the Tarheels played basketball. One time, when I was too young to know better, my parents took me to one of their games versus NC State. I liked red at the time and determined to pull for the Pack. It's a wonder my parents didn't leave me there at the stadium.

And that was State. A whole different level of hatred was reserved for Duke. One time, around the time the original Space Jam came out, I foolishly boasted that if advanced aliens came to earth and wagered the fate of Earth on a basketball game between themselves and the Due Blue devils, I'd probably pull for the aliens. And listen. As outrageous as a proposition as that was, I think I meant it, too.

I'm reading East of Eden by John Steinbeck right now. It's an amazing book. But there's a quote in there from the wise old Chinese servant Lee that says that hate can't stand on its own. One simply can't have hate without having, at the same time, love. Unfortunately, Lee notes, that love is for oneself and not others. Which, we now know, ain't real love at all?

Just like with my first engagement, I can look at my hatred of Duke and see an overbearing measure of self-love in it. After all, I could only hate them because I loved me and my own kind. As we witness a polarized and polarizing America, it all starts to add up, doesn't it? Being drunk with self-focused love, we take any offense to ourselves or our side as a condemnable affront. We type out screeds on social media as quickly as our fingers will bear simply because someone posted a meme mocking our side, our belief, our candidate.

In the Gospel of **Matthew, the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter**, Jesus directly contradicts this believe – *“you may have heard it said, love your neighbors and hate your enemies.”* This is significant because it points to a prevalent belief at the time. One that was actually espoused by the Pharisees. They were out telling people to love their neighbors, by which they meant other Jews and to hate their enemies which they took to mean everybody else. Which, to my way of thinking is just a more eloquent way of saying, “if you ain't for us, you're aginn us.” Either way, according to Jesus, it's just flat out wrong. Sounds suspiciously like America these days, unfortunately. That which doesn't agree with us, we HATE.

Even clearer teaching is found in the Gospel of **Luke 6:32-35** – *“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.”*

No, Jesus tells us, love our neighbors and pray for our enemies. He then goes on to elaborate – if you only love your people, your kind, your tribe, that isn't love, at least, not the real deal it isn't?

So, what is the real deal? What is the real McCoy?

Well, it's loving the other, the outsider, the strange, the foreign, the enemy even.

Jesus does a fairly great job of teaching us this in several places. He even shares with us a parable that points us directly to this understanding of love being so divorced from me, myself and mine in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Found in Luke chapter 10. You know how it goes. A Jew is robbed, attacked and left for dead by some robbers. His own folks, a priest and a Levite (another type of priest), scurry by without helping. Too focused on themselves and their needs, they leave the man dying. Ah, but a Samaritan happens to come by. This Samaritan would have been hated by Jews and likely he, them. The Samaritans and the Jews had a rather bloody and hate-filled history of late. Nevertheless, this man stops, takes the man to the ill and pays his bills for healing.

Jesus says, at the conclusion of that to the listeners then and now, “Go and do likewise.”

Love

And I know, that's a hard pill to swallow. Bitter medicine, if you will.

But let's remember that Romans verse. How did it go? Something about the love of God poured into our hearts?

You see, that's what makes it possible. That's the special sauce that enables us to transcend our selfish, self-invested love and extend it outward, beyond the places we would artificially stop it at. No, God's love empowers us to do the impossible – to love others as ourselves and to care for our enemies do deeply as to pray to God on their behalf.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

## Scripture & Quotes

**Matthew 5:43-47** – “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, <sup>1</sup> what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

**Dr. Ravi Chandra** – “*“if you want to be unhappy, be self-centered. If you want others to be unhappy, be self-centered.”*”

**Matthew 16:25** – “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

**John 15:13** – “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

**Romans 5:8** – “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

**I John 4:16** – “So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”

**Luke 6:32-35** – “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.”