

# Lord Jesus, Pelican of Mercy

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, Associate Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, May 13, 2012.  
The Sixth Sunday of Easter.  
Based on John 15:9-17.*

Happy Easter! I'd like to show you something. I had a hunch that there would be one of these at St. Bartholomew's. It is one of my favorite Christian symbols. But, there are so many beautiful things to look at that it gets lost. I couldn't find it. I had to have the staff help me to find it. The symbol is back here under the half dome. It's part of a whole sequence of animals that span the apse. Each of these animals is a symbol with meaning and a story to it. But since it is Mother's Day, I wanted to focus on this particular one: the second from the left. Now some of you won't be able to see the mosaic just yet. But, you will be able to see it as you come up for communion. It's a mosaic of a Pelican. It's a big bird with a long beak. You can see that it is a Mother Pelican, because five of her nestlings are beneath her, with their mouths wide open waiting to be fed by their mother.

Did you know that this Mother Pelican is a symbol for Christ? In the old days, everyone used to know this. Thomas Aquinas once sang about Jesus as a pelican: "*Pie Pelicane. Jesu Domine.*" "Lord Jesus, Pelican of mercy." This doesn't make any sense unless you know that there was an ancient understanding concerning the mother pelican. In lean and desperate times, rather than have her children starve, the mother would take that long beak and pierce her own side with her sharp point. The hatchlings would be saved from starvation by the blood that would flow from their mother's breast. Now that is a mother who loves her children!

And so, the pelican became a perfect example of the sacrificial love of a parent for her children. Just as Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, Christians in times past made the connection that Christ is also the good pelican that lays down her life's blood for her children. As her side is pierced for her children, so his side is pierced for our sakes on that horrible cross. So now you understand why Aquinas would sing, "*Pie Pelicane. Jesu Domine.*"

There is a reason that we don't sing about the Mother Pelican Christ anymore. We made a slight error. It's a little embarrassing. Every pelican has this large throat pouch. It can hold a great deal of food that the mother can gather while she is out and about and then bring the meal home to her children. It's as if your neck had its own convenient doggie bag.

But, when the mother pelican comes back to the nest, she can't turn her throat upside-down. That would be too awkward. She has to push her throat pouch against her chest with her beak to squeeze all of that food out into the nest so that her babies can eat. And the chicks would be scrambling all over her to get their fill. Here's the thing, though. The inner lining of the mother's throat pouch for some pelicans is blood red. And so, from afar, ancient people would watch the pelican feeding her children from her neck haul, and because of the color of the inside-out pouch, it would often look like the babies were drinking their mother's blood. Especially during those lean times, when the mother would have to be thorough to get every scrap of food out of the folds and wrinkles of her pouch.

So, I'm sorry to say, the pelican doesn't really pierce herself. The hatchlings don't really drink her blood. The blazing light of science has undermined the symbol, it seems. But, in the mother pelican's defense, in times of great need, to provide for her children, this mother must dig deep into herself; she gives all that she has from that pouch. Despite our mistake, the pelican still holds up as a vivid symbol of motherly care and Christ-like love.

For this is what we are about, today. In our readings, we are coming to some clarity about how Christ-like love behaves in the world. For when we listen to Christ, and watch his actions in the world, we are given the supreme example of true care and friendship, not just for parents to their children, but also for everyone to everyone else. Jesus puts it so well: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." He encouraged his disciples

back then, and he encourages us today, to abide in a friendly love that involves laying down our lives. This is heavy stuff!

We could be tempted to think that our friends are merely our confidants, the people who know a lot about us, and those of whom we know a lot. Or maybe the people with whom we have the most in common. Or maybe the people we see all the time. Or maybe our friends are those that we have on Facebook, those people we collect like baseball cards. You know, if you are on Facebook, it will actually suggest to you who your best eight friends are. The social media platform uses its mysterious algorithm to determine who makes it to the top of your list. My mother often pops up in my top eight. So it's pretty savvy. But, Friendship, in its truest sense, is so much deeper and universally accessible than this.

For example, this past week, a young woman in London, Jemima Layzell, was getting ready for her mother's birthday party when she collapsed and sadly, fell prey to a brain hemorrhage, and died. It has been a painful time for her family, but what is so remarkable was that her choice to be an organ donor had her saving the lives of eight other children. A few children shared her liver. Her lungs were given to another girl her age. Her heart went to a boy of five. She never met these people, didn't know a thing about them, but who would hesitate to say that she had eight new best friends?

Our true friends are not determined by our similarity, proximity, our confidences or some algorithm. And, for parents out there, your true children are not merely determined by those whom you have borne. Our true friends and children are the ones for whom we are willing to lay down our lives. Pelicans may not give of their life's blood, but people surely can. It could be a literal giving, with a donation of organs. It could be a figurative giving, say, by taking the risk of standing with someone who is being bullied, making oneself vulnerable to the same attacks. There are so many ways to give our lives for others.

So, hold this thought in prayer. How many people can you truly name for whom you would be willing to lay down your life if the need arose? Surely that list pales in comparison to your Christmas card mailing list or your list of Facebook friends. There is a friend list that matters so much more than these. Who is on it? A handful? One? Anyone? If you are a parent, does that list extend beyond your family? Who are your real friends? Perhaps, in prayer, when you come to receive the body and blood of our Lord who laid down his life for our sake, perhaps you will be inspired by this holy meal to make your real friend list a little bit longer. Your spiritual task is to make the friend list of people for whom you are willing to lay down your lives, the list of people for whom you are willing to love to the end, to the hilt, to make that list ever longer as you make your way through this world. What will it take to have your heart to be stretched by God, giving it room for more people to love?

The mark of a Christ-like life, the life that blurs the boundaries between heaven and earth, is not how much we collect and hoard. This life is marked by how much we give away, not only of our stuff but also how much of our lives. Our life matters most in how we give ourselves away in love, in ever widening circles of care and concern. May these circles of ours flourish and grow, evermore!

In the name of our lord and savior Jesus Christ, Lamb of God and Pelican of Mercy. Amen.

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