

# Looking for lessons for living the greatest love of all



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

"No one has greater love than this ..." Can you finish the sentence? "Than to have faith?" "Than to be more religious?" No.

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

Jesus of Nazareth said a lot about love. Bible students and preachers make much of different Greek words for love—friendly love, godly love, etc.—yet, doesn't it all come back to practicing something that matters, that makes a difference in people's lives? I'm guessing Jesus was after a quality of life regardless of semantic squabbles over what the word love means. Does "greater" mean an amount of love, a quantity, or a quality? Who are we willing to lay down our lives for? Only for "friends"? Did Jesus live, teach and die only for his "friends"? I don't think that's the traditional Christian story.

While driving to college classes in 1970s Seattle, I often played a tape of George Benson singing the song "The Greatest Love of All." The lyrics were written by Linda Creed for the 1977 film, "The Greatest," about Muhammad Ali. The song is a kind of anthem for self-reliance, with a genuine concern for the self-determination of the next generation.

"I believe the children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way; show them all the beauty they possess inside; give them a sense of pride, to make it easier; let the children's laughter remind us how we used to be."

This inspiring verse follows: "Everybody's searching for a hero, someone to look up to, I never found anyone to fulfill my needs; a lonely place to be, so I learned to depend on me."

There's a powerful sense of self-confidence in the words: "I decided long ago, Never to walk in anyone's shadow; if I fail, if I succeed, at least I'll live as I believe; no matter what they take from me, they can't take away my dignity."

Finally, the chorus: "Because the greatest love of all, is happening to me, I found the greatest love of all inside of me." (I recommend Whitney Houston's rendition on YouTube).

The song encourages looking inward: "The greatest love of all is easy to achieve, learning to love yourself, is the greatest love of all."

Does this correlate with Jesus' teaching to give one's life for someone familiar? The song says it begins with inner acceptance, believing in our own gifts. It has been said, "God is love," but what if you don't believe in God? In matters of loving kindness, does it matter? If a person lives by love and says that's divine while another person practices a loving life and says that's simply "in my nature," the result is the same. Love cannot be forced or commanded, though we hear the Nazarene Teacher say: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

To truly love your neighbor as yourself (a teaching from the book of Leviticus) you have to choose to draw from the deep well within, to have the dignity, the courageous core of inner strength that the song calls for, to love yourself first. Then ... to encourage others to love themselves too. That may be one of the greatest gifts we can pass along to another, especially the young.

Linda Creed, who wrote the lyrics to "The Greatest Love of All," collaborated to write some other hits including songs for the Stylistics and the Spinners ("You Make Me Feel Brand New," "Ghetto Child," "The Rubber Band Man"). Her personal story is no happy melody. According to Wikipedia: "Though diagnosed with breast cancer at 26, Creed kept on working, teaming with composer Michael Masser and writing the lyrics to the song "The Greatest Love of All." The lyrics of the song were written in the midst of her struggle with breast cancer. The words describe her feelings about coping with great challenges ... whether you succeed or fail, and passing that strength on to children to carry with them into their adult lives ... Creed died of breast cancer on April 10, 1986, at the age of 37."

In 1973, Linda Creed wrote "Life is a Song Worth Singing," recorded by Johnny Mathis.

Even then, her courage was clear as she could inspire with her great talent:

"Life is a song worth singing, Why don't you sing it? You hold the key in the palm of your hand, use it; Don't blame your life on the master plan, change it; Only you generate the power, to decide what to do with your life." This songwriter left us a soulful way to love who we are and sing it for others.

*Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.*