

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
September 23, 2012
Archbishop Elias Chacour**

Archbishop Elias Chacour, leader of the Melkite Catholic Church, is today's special speaker. Archbishop Chacour, a Palestinian-Arab Christian and citizen of Israel, has worked tirelessly for reconciliation in the Middle East and is a three-time nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. His book *Blood Brothers* is available in Pathway.

Brothers and sisters, yes, rejoice and be glad. You are the reason for that. Not because you are Americans, rejoice and be glad because the Lord has risen. We do not believe in the memories of some illustrious person called Jesus Christ; we believe *in* Jesus Christ. We believe in Jesus Christ because He is alive and He is amidst us. It gives me such a great honor and unique privilege to stand behind this pulpit and to address you, not as the ladies and gentlemen you are, but mainly as brothers and sisters. That is what we are. In fact, I am your forgotten foreign brother. I am a Palestinian. I have no bombs, never had any weapon in my hands. Never encourage anybody to have any kind of weapon in his heart or in his hands.

I am your Palestinian brother. Sometimes I introduce myself as being a walking contradiction. I carry in myself, apparently, all the contradictions that make a human life quite impossible. I am a Palestinian, proud to be Palestinian, and a Palestinian-Arab, which means my mother language is this very easy to learn Arabic language. You heard yourself laughing. I know you Americans are not very well known for knowing languages. I remember you had a president who hardly could speak correct English. That is your privilege. I don't object on that, but it is a pity. If you don't believe me that Arabic language is easy, please come back with me to Galilee tomorrow, and I'll take you to our kindergarten. Even children there speak Arabic. If they can do that, why can't you? Palestinian-Arab Christian—that complicates the story because Palestinians in your media are a band of terrorists, jealous of the Jews, and a Muslim is even worse. He is a bloodthirsty human being, inclined to violence. Now you have someone saying, "I am a Palestinian-Arab and Christian." That complicates the picture.

I thanked God when I discovered that I was not born Christian. It is the archbishop who is speaking. I was not born Christian, thank God. I don't know about you Presbyterian Christians gathered here. Were you born Christians or were you like me? I was born a baby, only a baby. Not any baby. I was created, imagine, in the image and with the likeness of God Himself. Can you imagine that? It is who I am. I became Christian not long ago. I know your church. Although extremely successful, you have been here, how many years? Sixty or 70 years existing here? Not more than that. You did not start Christianity, brothers and sisters. You did not start Christianity up here. You were the result of an outcome of 2,000 years of a procession of millions of people who believed in what you carry now, your values, your Christianity, your love for God. You are not the beginning. You are the continuation of this chain of human beings marching toward the Kingdom of God. I myself was not the start of everything.

I was born in Galilee, and we Palestinian Christians, we think and feel time a different way than you do. We will never forgive those who put watches like this in our hands that measure our time in seconds, minutes, hours, weeks, months, years. So accurate. That is too much for us. We still see time differently. We are a link to the past, but we point toward the future. We believe that 1,000 years are like one day before the Lord. That is what we believe, John [Pastor John Crosby]. If 1,000 years are like one day before the Lord, tell me what are 2,000 years? The day before yesterday. Just that.

The Lord was hanging around with our boys and girls or our men and women. He was taking part in our weddings and in our funerals. He was watching our shepherds, our grass, our flowers, our sheep, our boats, and He took all of those and made of them the Paradise of the Kingdom of Heaven. I do hope sincerely that everyone among us has the opportunity, at least once, to read these stories that were written. If you don't have the book, by the way, reading these stories are much more important than to read *Blood Brothers*. If you don't know the name of the Book, I will tell it to you. The name is the New Testament. In there, read where you find our stories. It is there you will see walking around the Sea of Galilee, a young man 27 years old. He is so immersed person in his business, Peter, the fisherman. He got a message, "Come, follow Me." Then the Lord saw another man, "Aw, come on. Leave Cana. Come on, follow Me." "You, Philip, abandon everything and follow me." How come these men from Galilee, who were successful in their businesses, when they heard Him saying, "Come and follow Me," they came and followed Him? How come?

Imagine yourself going on a pilgrimage, walking around the Sea of Galilee and some young Jew would come and say to you, "Mister, abandon everything and come and follow me." "You, ma'am, come and follow Me." Would you follow? Surely not! And if He insists that you have to follow Him, you would immediately call the police. That's how we have turned to being currently. What did He use in order for these men to follow Him? Either magic power or something much more important, a Divine power. And do you know that Jesus Christ never used any magic power. He attracted us with His love and with His Divine power, and they followed Him all through. Soon He abandoned His home city, Nazareth, because we people in Nazareth did not believe in Him. All we wanted Him to do was some miracles in our town, Nazareth, so we could pride ourselves in the His presence to the people of Capernaum although we thought, "That's the man. Come and see what He has done in our midst in Nazareth." But He did not do any miracles because they had no faith, see? And He prepared to abandon Nazareth and go live in Peter's house in Capernaum. It was there that He healed. He healed many patients, and the crippled man. It was something fabulous, something out of order.

The people used the Arabic telephone, ear to ear. That is very fast. It never stops. That's what is central to our society and takes an important place. Soon people started coming from Tyre and Sydon, from all over Galilee, Samaria, Judea, from Jerusalem. They wanted to hear that man, maybe to see some miracles, maybe to touch Him. He was attracting them so strongly.

After hearing the cripple, they went to sleep. They did not sleep like we do today, I hope each one in his bed. They used to lie down on the floor and cover themselves with one or two covers. That is why the father and mother would be always aware of whether their children were covered. It might make them sick if they got uncovered, and the parents would get up and cover them again. That is the way it used to be for us in our family before we were deported by the Israeli army.

Peter got up early to look at the Master. If He was uncovered, he would cover Him, right? But He was not there. Peter was alerted. He went to look for His Master. It was around 5:30 or 6:00, in the morning, very early. Around the house it was overcrowded with people from everywhere. They saw Peter going out and said, "He is going to fetch the Lord. We will go and follow Him," and the disciples got up, very anxious. "Where is the Master," they wondered, and they followed Peter. Peter walked around 3 kilometers, 1-1/2 miles. He knew where his master would be when He wanted to get away. He could never escape meeting people, but He would choose some quiet time to sit down and to converse with His Heavenly Father. He was on the Mount of Beatitudes. Those who never were there think the Mount of Beatitudes is higher than the Himalayas. It is not true. It is not even a mountain. It is not even on the sea level. It is below sea level. We imagine it was higher than the Himalayas because the person who was sitting there on top was very high. He was the Creator Himself.

When Jesus saw the disciples headed by Peter coming to Him, He was not annoyed. He did not tell them, "Wait. I am conversing with My Father. Wait until I finish My prayer." He looked at them. He saw them like sheep without a shepherd. He got moved like He always got moved when He got away, so He told them, "Come on! Come closer. Come closer to Me. Sit around Me." It was some time in early March. That time of year there is green grass you can sit on. They sat in semicircles around the Lord, and the crowd surrounded Him. The Lord looked at them and the disciples like He would look today at those who go to church. You are not the majority. You are the minority.

He looks at them and says, "Oh, My dear friends," and we read "Blessed are you...." This is a bad translation. It was written first in Aramaic. In Aramaic the term used is *yashrah*. *Yashrah* is taken from the verb, *yashir*, straight. To *yashir* means to straighten up, straighten up yourself. That was how it affected the disciples. The Eight Beatitudes were an urgent calling for the disciples to get up, to move, to do something. They needed to get their hands dirty, and really and truly, they are hungry for righteousness and for justice.

When He came to the last blessing, He did not tell them, "Oh, My dear friends, sit down," like you yourselves are now sitting, idle, doing nothing but being peace contemplators, "I love to contemplate peace." If you do love to contemplate peace, then get up, go away. Go away from in front of me. Go and be peace builders, proactive for peace. Get your hands dirty in order to open up for peace. Peace is not something that we have to look for. Peace is not the target. Peace is the way we have to live from the very beginning. Get up. Go ahead. Do something. Get your hands dirty in order not to have any war for making peace, not to have to get a return for being peacemakers but to change identity and to become inside of God. If you get your hands dirty for peace, you will be known as children of God, and this is what I wish for each of you here.

Don't forget, the Lord ended His sermon or His teaching, His appeal, by saying to His disciples what I will say to you now. "You are American Christians. You have to become the salt of the earth and the light for the world." That is not a calling for pride and for superiority. It is rather a calling, an urgent calling, for humility and for modesty like the salt. You know, you put a little salt in a dish to change the flavor, to get a better flavor for the food. This is our mission, my brothers and sisters. We need to be like the salt, to accept disappearing in the big dish so people can eat and have some flavor in what they eat. It is an invitation to humility, to accept disappearing like our forefathers in the first centuries when they were killed. We have never had a case of any

Christian who returned violence for violence. They accepted being killed because of the Lord. The leaders of the Romans killed so many Christians. The road to the emperor in Rome is strange. These Christians, when we killed them, every drop of blood that comes down from their bodies brings one more believer in Jesus Christ. They disappeared in order to survive, and when it comes to the light, you are the light of the world.

Oh, I am from the Third World, brothers and sisters. You know that sincerely I do love you, and I respect you. I admire much of what you do and what you are. You are the light of the world. That doesn't mean you are better than the others. That means you need to show the way toward something else, like signs along the road.

When you come from far away and see a sign saying Minneapolis, you don't say, "Here I am in Minneapolis." You must have something wrong in your head. This broad sign is made to invite you from farther away to continue your way until you reach Minneapolis. The same thing for us Christians. To be the light of the world means we have to show others how to continue looking for the Lord until they reach the goal. Very often in our countries of the Third World, we like to tell you very humbly that sometimes new voices have too much authority. We know you are the light of the world, but for God's sake, turn down your projectors. You are blinding us with your light. Christ was not blinding.

And if you are the light of the world, you should give up this temptation to walk ahead of everybody and to say to the Lord, "We are Americans. Follow us, Lord." Since we are that new light, what would be reflected in front of us is our shadow, and you people would believe that our shadow is the leader. Poor we are if we do that. We need to follow the Lord, not to ask Him to follow us.

My brothers and sisters, really, I bring you the greetings of so many Christians, thousands of them that I met in Lebanon last week, over 370,000 Lebanese Christians gathered around the Holy Father, the Pope, in Beirut. I bring you their greetings, their fears, and their worries that they might disappear. They all ask, "What will happen to us after the Syrian tragedy stops? Will our faith be like the faith of the Christians in Iraq?" After the invasion of Iraq, very few Christians are still there, 500,000 from altogether 2,000,500. They are scattered everywhere in the Middle East and many thousands are here in the U.S.

I was visiting Detroit, visiting my friend Bishop Ibrahim Ibrahim from Iraq. We celebrated Mass in the huge eparchy there, and he told me, "Abuna, five years ago all I had in Detroit were 4,000 Iraqi Christians. Now I have over 150,000 Christians from Iraq, refugees here, not knowing their future, not very clear on what they are to do, they are just lost."

In Galilee where I live, where I work, I am proud to have dedicated believers among my community members, one is called Jesus Christ, another is called Mary, others are called apostles. It is such a great honor for me, but I tell you, they are not easy to deal with. You are to be serious with them if you want to belong to them and they belong to you. The Christians in Galilee endured a tremendous disaster since 1948 when Israel was created and the Palestinians were ethnically cleansed. Many hundreds of thousands were deported to the neighboring Arab countries. Out of 100 percent of Christians, only 25 percent remain in the country.

The others, I have visited many of them last week in Dbayeh Refugee Camp in Lebanon. They became refugees, deportees. Many are living among you here. We are doing our utmost, and we invite you to help us in that respect, to convince the Christians to stay in their homes, work on their land, and continue to witness for the message of Jesus Christ for that is in Jesus Christ. That is why I invite you when you go to the Holy Land to go and visit the holy places for sure, go into the Holy Sepulchre and do what you want, but don't stay too long there because it is somehow smelly. It needs more light in it. You can't see anything. It is the only place in the world, the Holy Sepulchre, where it is officially written in the marble, "He is not here." So tell me what are you going to do where He is not? Get out. Get out. It is written, "He is risen." Go find Him risen. Go down to Galilee to my diocese to see the risen Lord. Don't stay long. We have enough problems together, Jews and Palestinians, without you.

Come and visit, then go along, go ahead, go back to your own Galilee, here in Minneapolis, where you have to witness to them in the Lord, where you have to give attention to someone whom you never respected, where you have to help an old man or woman, one who never deserved your attention. This is your Galilee. This is your risen Lord, your Holy Sepulchre. Who among us, me the first, did not build his own Holy Sepulchre of selfishness, of self interest, of this is mine, not the others', lack of sharing, lack of openness? These are our Holy Sepulchres. We have to get rid of them because it is not as deep as that sepulchre. He is not here. Go and look for Him.

My dear brothers and sisters, I wish that my compatriots, the Christians from Galilee, they are all Palestinian-Arabs, could stand here secretly and look at you and say, "My goodness, is that you? Are these Americans? They are beautiful people." Continue, please, to be the nice image of America. What we receive from you abroad is not very beautiful. Send us everything, but stop sending weapons and money. That has never helped us. That will never help us. Send us some copies of your Constitution. That would be much better. We need your friendship. We are open to welcome you. I hope, my dear John [Pastor John Crosby], you will have the courage to go ahead concretely and you are ready to build a good relationship between your beautiful community and our poor communities. We have lots to give you, and we know we have lots to receive from you, but the last thing would be money.

May God bless you, bless this community, and be always risen among you and in your lives. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.