

GOT LOVE? GIVE IT AWAY!

(2/11/18)

Scripture Lessons: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
John 13:34-35

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

February is a short but busy month. It contains Washington’s Birthday and Lincoln’s Birthday, which have been combined into Presidents’ Day. We have Groundhog Day and the Super Bowl (which was no cause for celebration this year). Our church’s annual meeting will be held following our worship service today.

This morning I would like us to think about a February holiday that is sometimes lost in the shuffle: Valentine’s Day. Valentine’s Day coincides with Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent this year. You will note that the word “valentine” contains the word “lent” within it. I’m not sure what my point is in saying this. Just saying.

Valentine’s Day is named for St. Valentine, a kindly old priest who lived during the third century in Rome. According to history and legend, his life was distinguished by a very special love of God, a love so strong that it uplifted him not only spiritually but also physically. One day, in the midst of prayer, he found himself sitting in the top of a tree accompanied by a starling. The starling burrowed into Valentine’s beard. From that time on, the starling would circle around him and bring him flowers whenever he sat and thought about love. By the way, I believe that this is literally possible.

One day Valentine had an insight: *What good is love if it does not give rise to action?* He decided to help others become as happy as he was. He decided to help others discover the power of love. He started by pleading the case of a young man who had been refused admission to medical school because he was so bent and frail the faculty believed he would be unable to withstand the rigors of study. They told Valentine that he was wasting his time championing this young man’s cause; they wouldn’t admit him to medical studies even if Valentine carried him to the college on his shoulders.

Valentine went home and nursed the young man to health. A year later when he and the young man returned to the college, the young man was standing straight and tall. Even more impressive, however, was what the young man carried on his back. It was

Valentine, who told the startled faculty, “You didn’t say what you’d do if *he* carried *me* on his shoulders.” The young man was admitted to medical studies.

Valentine knew that not everyone was called to be a priest. He knew that most people have other equally noble callings, callings like marriage and a family. But Valentine was psychologically astute enough to know that some people are unable to respond to their true calling because they are paralyzed by fear. By the way, this is true.

Valentine noticed that every Sunday in church there was a young man who always stood alone and cast shy glances at a young woman who also stood alone. Ministers notice these things. They don’t just notice when people fall asleep during their sermons. Valentine decided that he would give love a little boost. He invited the two young people to come to the rectory after hours for extra study of scripture. At the meetings, where he served them wine and cake, he led them in the study of some of the great love stories of the Bible: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, and the story of Ruth. The young couple began to walk home together after the meetings. Not too long after, they married and later named one of their sons Valentine.

Valentine had been in love once himself, but his beloved had left him for another. Instead of being filled with jealousy and fantasies of revenge, he fell to his knees in prayer and asked God for help. The message he received was that he was not meant to be her lover but her dearest friend.

It was exactly what the woman needed. The man she had chosen over Valentine was a rich man but not a kind and loving man. She lived in comfort, but her marriage was not a loving marriage. Valentine, responding to his friend’s sadness, shared with her the lesson he had learned, that the cure for inner pain is to look outward, to see the pain of others and respond. The woman used her riches to open a home for orphan children. Though her marriage was still unsatisfactory, the woman became happy and peaceful.

One day an orphan from his friend’s orphanage came to Valentine and said, “I want to send my love to the woman who founded our orphanage, but I don’t know how to write.” Valentine told the child that he would write the letter. He leaned down and tore a piece of lace off the border of his priestly robe. Then he called to the starling to peck his arm. He dabbed a quill in the pinprick of his blood and wrote, “I love you” on the lace.

This began the custom of declaring one's love in writing in a red and florid script on paper as delicate as a doily.

Valentine's ministry of love continued to spread. He encouraged people to write letters of love. As he lay dying in ripe old age, his last words were "At the center of all is love." When he finally breathed his last, church bells rang throughout the city. People were so touched by not only the message but by the life of this loving man that husbands returned to the families they had abandoned and love letters which had been written to loved ones long ago suddenly and miraculously reappeared.

The people of Rome came before the Pope and petitioned him to make Valentine a saint. "I know this man," the Pope said quietly. The Pope then told them about a doctor who had unselfishly and tirelessly risked his life to minister to those afflicted by a recent plague. The Pope discovered that this wonderful doctor would not have made it to medical school without having being healed himself many years earlier by a kindly old priest--that's right, by Valentine.

When Valentine was proclaimed a saint, the Pope called people to remember that this simple man's life was an example and a reminder of the importance of love. Valentine's Day was to be a feast day of love both declared and deployed. Over the years the many customs which have become a part of this day have accrued: the prominence of the color red, the symbol of blood; sending or giving cards like the little orphan child; going out to dinner like the young couple at the rectory; bringing flowers as the starling did to Valentine; and even balloons to symbolize the love that lifted Valentine's heart.

Valentine grasped the meaning and importance of romantic love. Romantic love is a beautiful part of life, but Valentine knew that there was more to love than this. He knew that love involved decision and commitment. As the existentialist philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard said, romantic love must give way to the kind of love that is forged in the trials and tribulations of everyday life. The second stage of love is built around more than feelings. It is built on a commitment to love for better and for worse. It is built around not only an acceptance of the shadow side of the person you love, the dark or difficult areas, but around an awareness of your own shadow as well. This second kind of love, a love that is tempered by fire, is a harder love to live.

Valentine's life and teaching challenge us to incarnate this second kind of love, a selfless love. Love is a feeling, but it is more than a feeling. As Valentine said, what good is love if it does not give rise to action? So Valentine devoted himself to finding ways to actualize love and bring its healing power into the lives of others. He knew that if he could do this, he would help to make other people as deeply happy as he was.

This man's life was a lesson in love. He helped the young man fulfill his life's dream, the dream of becoming a doctor and helping others. Isn't this what we do in our mission outreach? This month, when we support the Assabet Valley Pastoral Counseling Center we are helping people live their lives more fully. Last month, when we helped a Tibetan refugee child whom we have never met receive an education, we are helping him become who God wants him to be. These are examples of the deeper dimension of love.

Valentine would approve of our mission outreach. But he would also call us to actualize this deeper love in our personal lives, in our families, and in our church. This deeper kind of love leads to and is built around forgiveness. Without it, all marriages would fail. When the woman whom Valentine loved rejected him, he responded not with hatred but with love. His love then called forth the best in the person who had hurt him.

On the night in which he gave us the Great Commandment, that we should love one another as he loves us, Jesus washed his disciples' feet. He washed the feet of those who, only a short time later, were to betray him, deny him, and desert him. Scripture doesn't say that he washed everyone's feet but Judas's. It says he washed their feet and he told them to wash each other's feet.

You can't be married for many years without being hurt by the one you love. Can your love rise above that hurt? You can't be married for many years without hurting the one you love. Can your love help to heal that hurt? If you have children, you know they have the power to hurt you. You also know that, despite your best intentions, you have hurt them. In our marriages, in our parenting, in our friendships, and in our church, we need to rise above the pain we both experience and inflict. We cannot allow the hurt to turn into scar tissue that hardens our heart.

Valentine tells us that the cure for inner pain is to turn outward. This is difficult to do. When we have been hurt, we sometimes like to stay with our hurt. We may even nurture it a little to keep it alive. What we need to do is understand and forgive, to see

and reach out to the pain of the person who has hurt us. This can help to heal our own pain. This doesn't mean that we should remain in an abusive relationship. It means that whatever we need to do does not have to be done in anger. It can be done in love.

Finally, we should realize that our love is grounded in God, in the love of God for all creation. It took God hundreds of millions of years to create human beings, but God finally evolved a creature that is capable of giving and receiving love. Because we can love God and because we can love each other, we can become incarnations of God's Holy Spirit. We can do this if we build our lives around love.

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Paul said, "So faith, hope, love abide, but the greatest of these is love." As the writer of the First Letter of John states:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Valentine's dying words were, "At the center of all is love." At the center of all is love, because at the center of all is God, and God is love.

Every Christmas we try to move past the commercial hype to not only celebrate the birth of Jesus but to experience the birth of Christ within our hearts. This Valentine's Day let's try to move past the commercial hype to celebrate the life of a Christian saint, one who grasped both the human and the divine dimensions of love and who incarnated them in his life. Valentine calls us to experience and actualize the healing power of love within our heart and within our relationships.

If we do this, if we discover the incredible treasure of love and then give this precious gift away, we will be the kind of blessing to our world that Valentine was to his.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
February 11, 2018*