

February 10, 2008

Rev. Anne M. Rosebrock

## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### Love in Any Language

John 3:16-17

I was a freshman at college living in a dormitory at Ball State University and I got a call from the front desk that I had received flowers. I was so excited, it was Valentine's Day and I raced down the hall and down the stairs to claim my gift. The bouquet was beautiful. It was a dozen big red roses with baby's breath. The roses were fabulous. I was smiling ear to ear as I carried that vase back to my room. I moved slowly back to my room, showing the bouquet to anyone who would stop to look at it. I was a little worried it might be from my dad, not that it wouldn't be nice to have flowers from my dad, but I hoping for a more romantic gesture. I cannot describe the thrill that I felt. Life could not have been any better at that moment. I put down the flowers and with great expectations, I opened the card and immediately realized that the flowers were not for me. My room number was on the card, but the name was not mine. They were for another girl on the same floor of my dorm. It had been the perfect Valentine's Day for a moment in time. Now, I was faced with a dilemma. What to do with these beautiful flowers?

That experience sums up Valentine's Day in this culture. It can be delight. If you are romantically linked and linked to a romantic male or female, it may be a great and wonderful day. Enjoy! But it can also be a disaster. For so many, the expectations of the day leave us feeling lonely and disappointed. The media has shaped unrealistic expectations for the day.

That day in the dorm, I finally took the flowers back to the desk and had the attendant call the lucky recipient.

One of the biggest sellers in book stores is romance novels. You know the books; they have men like Fabio on the cover. They tell stories of love and romance that are from a world of fantasy. Soap operas continue to hold the interest of devoted followers who watch their favorite daytime television saga five days a week. Of course the beauty of the soap opera is you can miss months and never really miss out on the story line. There is intrigue and suspense, romance and betrayal. We are in love with love. We follow the love stories of the rich and famous, watching their every move.

The human heart yearns for love. Clearly, humanity seeks to love and to be loved and in the process has made mistake after mistake generation after generation. An ocean of tears has been cried for lost loves, broken hearts and unrequited affection. Yet, there is

always the hope of the one. That one that makes your heart sing, that one that will not betray, that one that will be there always loving unselfishly and eternally.

We began the journey of Lent on Wednesday. This is a season for personal reflection and repentance. It is a time to look deep within and explore our relationship with the Divine. It is time to step into the footsteps of Jesus and follow him through his teachings, his arrest, his crucifixion and ultimately his resurrection. The season begins with the love of God and the season ends with the love of God.

I was asked earlier in the week why we would have chocolate today when Lent is a season to abstain from excess. However, when it comes to love, we can never have enough. We ought not abstain from the love of God on this day or any day. Clearly the culture seeks to get every last possible dime out of Valentine's Day, but for the faithful, for those who understand that they are claimed by God and loved by God eternally, the Feast of St. Valentine is a time of rejoicing and gratitude. Even in the season of Lent, affirming the love that God holds for us is itself a matter of discipline. We are so insecure about love in this culture, that it is a discipline to regularly and intentionally assess our openness to the God's love. This is a time to turn from our focus on the world that so occupies our thoughts and turn toward the love of God that brings us the wholeness we so deeply desire.

The declaration of that love is found in John 3:16-17. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. <sup>17</sup> For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved."

These words sum up the motivation of God. These words give us all the affirmation of love that we will ever need in this life and beyond. Yet, we tend to cling to the theology of the Old Testament - an eye for an eye, retribution and distance from the Divine. In the birth of Jesus, however, God draws us back to God. In the life and teachings of Jesus we find the path of faith for the living of our days. God loves us, you and me, and all of humanity so deeply, so powerfully, so completely, that God sends us Jesus not to condemn, not to judge, not to reject, but to draw us close, hold us dear now and forever. What more gift of love will we ever need? What more declaration of love could be more powerful?

From what I have read, Valentine or variations of that word was a popular given name in the ancient Roman Empire. In 496, The Feast of St. Valentine was established to honor the life of a priest named Valentine. The name itself comes from the root "valens" which means "worthy".

In the eyes of God, you are worthy. I know that it is more than our minds and hearts can fully embrace, but you and I are worthy in God's sight. We are worthy, not because of our own doing, not because we are individually righteous or pure, but we are worthy because of God's grace. We are worthy fully and completely because God decided we are worthy of God's love. It is the soul within each of us that God so deeply cherishes that God sent Jesus to show us the power and enduring nature of God's love. Jesus'

entire ministry was pointing to the love of God. Jesus came not to be worshipped, but to worship God. He fully embodied the love of God and shared that love lavishly and radically to all who were open to him. There is no language, there is no distance, there is no act that can separate us from God's love.

The whole point of the two passages read this morning is that in God's eyes we are worthy.

I know that much of Christian theology is based on life with God before the birth of Jesus. You can find sermon after sermon on the internet and on television declaring that humanity is an abomination in God's sight. Such a distortion of the scripture is used to manipulate and control. Such theology has left a huge question mark in our lives, wondering, ever wondering if we can ever measure up, ever be worthy of God's love. Our challenge this Lent is to fully embrace that Jesus came to love us and to show us the way of love. We are not the rejected and despised children of God, rather we are the beloved children of God.

Take time this Lent to explore the truth of God's love in your life. For I am confident that if you and I were to really understand the enormity of God's love for us, we would live each and every day in ways that always honor God. If we realized the depth of God's devotion to us, we would live our lives completely devoted to God.

As we begin this journey of Lent, we begin with the love of God. As we journey through Lent, may we take every opportunity to become engulfed by that love and as we move through Holy Week, as we live through the rejection of Jesus' love leading to pain, suffering and ultimately death, may we calculate the cost of the Divine love for us. Easter, we will experience the ultimate act of love - the Resurrection - love everlasting.

Sadly, our understanding of love is rooted in our experience of love here on earth. Love that we have known in this life may have been manipulative, controlling, and self-serving. We have the love of soap operas and romance novels to shape our view of love. We have country songs of broken dreams and cheatin' hearts to tell of love. We recall fairy tales of heroes and damsels in distress to fashion our expectations of love. But none of these will even begin to encompass the truth of the real and lasting love in our lives. It is a challenge for us to conceive of a love as deep and enduring as the love of God.

It is Catherine of Siena who speaks of "inestimable love." That love is beyond comprehension. That love is the summation of our faith that we read about in Romans. Nothing can separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ. Nothing, nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God. It is the summation of Paul's theology and the Christian faith.

What speaks to us in this season of Lent is that Divine love is eternally entwined with the cross. Ours is a journey to the cross and beyond. Ours is a journey with love that is lasting. Ours is a journey with a Divine love that will not let us go. We may run, we

may hide, we may feel unworthy, we may reject this love, but it is love that will not reject us.

Ann LaMott writes in her book, *Traveling Mercies*, about her struggle with actually embracing the love that God held for her. She is wooed by God's love. Yet, she could not imagine actually becoming vulnerable to that love, actually allowing that love to reshape her life, actually giving into the love of her life. She writes of a late night encounter with the Divine.

"After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there -- of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.'

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with." *Traveling Mercies* Ann LaMott

Over time LaMott, who had all sorts of issues in life, would slowly but surely be won over by the love of God and eventually she would open the door to her heart and to her home to that love. She had known various loves in this world, but she was alone and afraid. It was not until she experienced true love, divine love that she began to live, to really live and in the process began to share God's love with others.

This is a season to repent to turn from the world that is so willing to define us in negative terms and turn toward God who delights in us and loves us completely. Valentine's Day, when the world is expecting hearts and flowers, make space for the love that will never leave you, the love that seeks not to control you, the love that is with you even when you turn, even when you deny, even when you run away, the love that cost the lover everything. At the heart of the Feast of St. Valentine is not flowers or candy, it is love everlasting a love that seeks not to condemn, but save. A love that saves us from a small life of self interest to an eternal life of assurance, hope and acceptance.

Feel it? God is wooing you this day; quietly, persistently, eternally wooing you toward the true love of your life. Love in any language, love in any circumstances, love in any time and place is named Yahweh, God Almighty, God of love. Thanks be to God, you are loved!