

"IF WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER..."

TODAY IS VALENTINE'S DAY.

IT'S ALSO TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY.

ONE OF THOSE IS LISTED AT THE TOP OF YOUR BULLETIN.

IT'S NOT VALENTINE'S DAY.

ONE OF THEM IS DEPICTED ON THE COVER OF YOUR BULLETIN.

THAT'S NOT VALENTINE'S DAY, EITHER, IS IT?

WE FIND THE STORY OF THE TRANSFIGURATION IN SCRIPTURE, BUT WE DON'T FIND VALENTINE'S DAY.

IT WOULD PROBABLY SEEM LOGICAL THEN, TO FOCUS OUR ATTENTION ON THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD RATHER THAN VALENTINE'S DAY.

THAT'S *NOT* WHERE OUR FOCUS WILL BE, THOUGH.

AFTER ALL, THE TRANSFIGURATION APPEARS EVERY YEAR ON A SUNDAY OF THE CHURCH CALENDAR.

VALENTINE'S DAY ONLY FALLS ON A SUNDAY ONCE EVERY 7 YEARS.

THAT'S WHERE OUR FOCUS IS GOING TO BE THIS MORNING.

BUT I KNOW THERE ARE THOSE FOR WHOM THIS IS A DAY TO BE AVOIDED, IGNORED OR DREADED.

THERE ARE PROBABLY EVEN THOSE WHO AREN'T HERE TODAY PRECISELY BECAUSE IT IS VALENTINE'S DAY.

I SERIOUSLY DOUBT THAT ANYONE STAYED HOME BECAUSE IT'S TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY.

ON THE FLIP SIDE, THERE MAY EVEN BE THOSE WHO *ARE* HERE ONLY BECAUSE IT'S VALENTINE'S DAY BUT I CAN'T IMAGINE ANYONE WOKE UP THIS MORNING THINKING, "*I DON'T USUALLY GO TO CHURCH BUT TODAY I WILL. HOW COULD I NOT GO - IT'S TRANSFIGURATION DAY!*"

NOW, I SAID THAT WHILE WE FIND TRANSFIGURATION DAY IN THE BIBLE, WE DON'T FIND VALENTINE'S DAY.

THAT MAY BE TECHNICALLY CORRECT, BUT WE FIND A LOT MORE IN THE BIBLE ABOUT THE FOCAL POINT OF VALENTINE'S DAY THAN ABOUT VIRTUALLY ANY OTHER TOPIC.

AND IT'S THAT VERY POINT THAT I'D LIKE US TO FOCUS ON THIS MORNING.

YES, THERE ARE THOSE WHO AVOID, IGNORE OR DREAD THIS DAY & JUST BECAUSE THEY *DO* DOESN'T MEAN WE SHOULD SHY AWAY FROM CELEBRATING THE VERY SPECIAL LOVE THAT IS SHARED BY TWO PEOPLE IN A COMMITTED, JOYOUS RELATIONSHIP.

WE *SHOULD* CELEBRATE THAT & I HOPE MANY OF YOU ARE TODAY OR HAVE ALREADY DONE SO THIS WEEKEND.

THERE ARE MANY FANCIFUL LEGENDS REGARDING THE ORIGIN OF VALENTINE'S DAY.

PERHAPS THE MOST WELL-KNOWN & MOST MOVING IS THE STORY OF THE PRIEST AFTER WHOM THE HOLIDAY TAKES ITS NAME.

VALENTINE WAS A PRIEST SOME 250 YEARS AFTER CHRIST.

HE LIVED IN ROME DURING THE REIGN OF EMPEROR CLAUDIUS, WHO WAS COMMITTED TO REBUILDING THE ONCE-GREAT ROMAN ARMY.

CLAUDIUS BELIEVED IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR MEN TO VOLUNTEER FOR ARMED SERVICE, RATHER THAN DRAFTING MEN INTO SERVICE AGAINST THEIR WILL.

BUT, GIVEN A CHOICE, MOST YOUNG MEN IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE REFUSED TO SERVE.

THEY'D RATHER STAY AT HOME WITH THEIR WIVES AND CHILDREN THAN GO OFF TO BATTLE.

CLAUDIUS CAME TO BELIEVE THAT ONLY SINGLE MEN WOULD VOLUNTEER FOR SERVICE, SO HE ISSUED A ROYAL EDICT THAT BANNED ALL FURTHER MARRIAGES.

HE ACTUALLY OUTLAWED WEDDINGS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE, EARNING HIMSELF THE NICK-NAME CLAUDIUS THE CRUEL.

VALENTINE THOUGHT IT WAS RIDICULOUS!

ONE OF HIS FAVORITE DUTIES AS A PRIEST WAS TO MARRY PEOPLE.

SO AFTER EMPEROR CLAUDIUS PASSED HIS LAW, VALENTINE SECRETLY CONTINUED PERFORMING MARRIAGE CEREMONIES.

HE WOULD WHISPER THE WORDS OF THE CEREMONY, WHILE LISTENING FOR SOLDIERS ON THE STEPS OUTSIDE.

ONE NIGHT, DURING A CEREMONY, VALENTINE HEARD FOOTSTEPS AT HIS DOOR.

THE COUPLE HE WAS MARRYING ESCAPED, BUT HE WAS CAUGHT.

HE WAS THROWN IN JAIL AND SENTENCED TO DEATH.

VALENTINE TRIED TO STAY CHEERFUL.

MANY OF THE YOUNG COUPLES HE HAD MARRIED CAME TO VISIT HIM IN JAIL.

THEY THREW FLOWERS AND NOTES UP TO HIS WINDOW.

THEY WANTED HIM TO KNOW THAT THEY, TOO, BELIEVED IN LOVE.

ONE DAY, HE RECEIVED A VISIT FROM THE DAUGHTER OF ONE OF THE PRISON GUARDS.

HER FATHER ALLOWED HER TO VISIT HIM IN HIS CELL AND THEY OFTEN SAT AND TALKED FOR HOURS.

SHE BELIEVED HE HAD DONE THE RIGHT THING BY IGNORING THE EMPEROR AND PERFORMING WEDDINGS.

ON THE DAY VALENTINE WAS TO DIE, HE LEFT HER A NOTE THANKING HER FOR HER FRIENDSHIP AND LOYALTY.

HE SIGNED IT, "LOVE FROM YOUR VALENTINE."

THAT NOTE STARTED THE CUSTOM OF EXCHANGING LOVE NOTES ON VALENTINE'S DAY.

IT WAS WRITTEN ON THE DAY HE DIED, FEBRUARY 14, 269 A.D.—A DAY THAT WAS SET ASIDE IN HONOR OF A MAN WHO GAVE HIS LIFE FOR GOD AND FOR LOVE.

NOW, EVERY YEAR ON THIS DAY, PEOPLE REMEMBER SAINT VALENTINE, BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY, THEY THINK ABOUT LOVE.

THAT'S WHERE I'D LIKE US TO FOCUS OUR ATTENTION THIS MORNING – ON LOVE.

LET'S MOVE BEYOND THE LOVE, THOUGH, THAT IS SIMPLY ROMANTIC LOVE & LOOK AT THE FULL SCOPE OF LOVE THAT WE FIND IN SCRIPTURE.

AS WE WERE MAKING OUR WAY THROUGH THE SECOND HALF OF PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS, WE LOOKED AT THE 13TH CHAPTER- A CHAPTER SO COMPLETELY FOCUSED ON THIS CONCEPT THAT IT'S BEEN LABELLED "THE LOVE CHAPTER."

WHAT WE'VE READ THIS MORNING, THOUGH, IS TAKEN FROM AN ENTIRE *BOOK* THAT IS FOCUSED ON LOVE.

IF THERE IS ONE BOOK IN THE BIBLE THAT CAN BE SUMMED UP IN A SINGLE WORD, IT WOULD BE FIRST JOHN & THAT ONE WORD WOULD BE "LOVE."

THAT SHOULDN'T BE AT ALL SURPRISING.

CONSIDER HOW OFTEN THE WORD "LOVE" IS FOUND PROMINENTLY IN JOHN'S *GOSPEL*.

THERE'S THE MOST BELOVED VERSE IN THE ENTIRE BIBLE – "*FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.*"

THINK OF THE WORDS OF JESUS IN THE UPPER ROOM IN JOHN'S *GOSPEL*:

AS THE FATHER HAS LOVED ME, SO I HAVE LOVED YOU; ABIDE IN MY LOVE.

IF YOU KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS, YOU WILL ABIDE IN MY LOVE, JUST AS I HAVE KEPT MY FATHER'S COMMANDMENTS AND ABIDE IN HIS LOVE.

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.

I AM GIVING YOU THESE COMMANDS SO THAT YOU MAY LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

IN THE ENTIRETY OF THE UPPER ROOM DISCOURSE IN JOHN, JESUS USES THE L-WORD NO LESS THAN 30 TIMES IN 18 DIFFERENT VERSES.

IT DOESN'T TAKE A BIBLE SCHOLAR TO SEE THAT LOVE MEANT A LOT TO JESUS - THAT THIS WAS HIS CENTRAL MESSAGE TO HIS DISCIPLES.

LOOKING AT THIS BRIEF EXCERPT FROM THAT PASSAGE IN JOHN'S *GOSPEL* & TAKING OUR SCRIPTURE READING THIS MORNING FROM THE FIRST LETTER OF JOHN, JESUS REVEALS FOR US HOW TO OBTAIN A LOVE WORTH GIVING & IT ALL BEGINS WHEN WE RECEIVE HIS LOVE FOR US.

LAST WEEK IN THE CHILDREN'S SERMON, DREW LED THE CHILDREN IN SINGING THE MOST BELOVED OF ALL CHILDREN'S SONGS – "JESUS LOVES ME."

YOU'VE HEARD THE STORY OF THE GREAT KARL BARTH – A MAN WHO PROBABLY HAD A GREATER INFLUENCE ON CHRISTIAN THINKING THAN ANY OTHER INDIVIDUAL IN THE 20TH CENTURY.

IN 1962, ON BARTH'S ONE VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES, HE WAS ASKED BY A REPORTER HOW HE WOULD SUMMARIZE THE ESSENCE OF THE MILLIONS OF WORDS HE HAD PUBLISHED.

HIS RESPONSE WAS, "*JESUS LOVES ME, THIS I KNOW, FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO.*"

THIS WAS THE ESSENCE OF HIS TEACHING.

IT LIES AT THE HEART OF EVERYTHING WE BELIEVE.

OUR LOVE FINDS ITS INITIATIVE IN GOD'S LOVE FOR US.

YOU CAN LOVE OTHERS BECAUSE GOD LOVES YOU.

NOTICE THAT JOHN BEGINS & ENDS THIS ENTIRE SECTION WITH AN EMPHASIS ON OUR LOVE FOR OTHERS.

HE STARTS BY SAYING, "*LET US LOVE ONE ANOTHER...*" AND HE ENDS BY SAYING, "*...THOSE WHO LOVE GOD MUST LOVE THEIR BROTHERS & SISTERS AS WELL.*"

JOHN ISN'T TALKING HERE ABOUT ROMANTIC LOVE.

HE ISN'T TALKING ABOUT A LOVE THAT CONFINES ITSELF TO FAMILY OR FRIENDS.

IT ISN'T LOVE FOR EVERYONE WHO LOOKS LIKE YOU & ACTS LIKE YOU & TALKS LIKE YOU & BELIEVES LIKE YOU.

JOHN IS TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING MUCH BIGGER.

HE'S TALKING ABOUT A LOVE THAT KNOWS NO BOUNDS.

HE'S TALKING ABOUT A LOVE THAT – WELL, A LOVE THAT MIRRORS GOD'S LOVE FOR US.

THERE ARE ANY NUMBER OF ASTOUNDING STATEMENTS MADE IN THIS PASSAGE.

AMONG THEM IS THE MOST INCREDIBLE DESCRIPTION OF WHO GOD IS THAT ANYONE HAS EVER OFFERED – "GOD IS LOVE."

BUT I WOULD SUGGEST THAT THERE IS ANOTHER – PERHAPS EVEN MORE ASTOUNDING STATEMENT WITHIN THESE VERSES.

JOHN TELLS US THAT NO ONE HAS EVER SEEN GOD.

THAT STATEMENT ISN'T STARTLING TO US.

WE KNOW THAT TO BE TRUE.

WE HAVE NO TROUBLE BELIEVING IT.

BUT IT BECOMES ASTOUNDING WHEN HE FOLLOWS IT UP WITH THESE WORDS: "*...IF WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER, GOD ABIDES IN US AND HIS LOVE IS PERFECTED IN US.*"

WHAT DOES HE MEAN BY THIS?

I THINK HE'S TRYING TO TELL US THAT IT IS, IN FACT, POSSIBLE TO SEE GOD.

WE CAN SEE GOD WHEN WE SEE LOVE.

AND – EVEN MORE BOLDLY – HE'S TELLING US THAT WE CAN ENABLE OTHERS TO SEE GOD THROUGH US.

SOMEONE HAS BEEN SO BRASH AS TO SAY THAT WE ARE CALLED TO BE LIKE GOD.

WE ARE CALLED TO LOVE LIKE GOD LOVES – WITHOUT COUNTING THE COST, WITHOUT SETTING LIMITS,
WITHOUT ASKING, “WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?”

MANY YEARS AGO, AN AMERICAN JOURNALIST IN CHINA WAS WATCHING A CATHOLIC NUN CLEANSING
THE GANGRENOUS SORES OF WOUNDED SOLDIERS IN A HOSPITAL.

THE JOURNALIST SAID TO HER, “I WOULDN’T DO THAT FOR A MILLION DOLLARS.”

WITHOUT PAUSING IN HER WORK, THE NUN QUIETLY SAID, “NEITHER WOULD I.”

ONLY THE LOVE OF GOD, REVEALED IN JESUS CHRIST, CAN INSPIRE YOU TO BRING YOUR NOBLEST LOVE
TO THE WORLD’S GREATEST NEED.

BUT IT IS THEN THAT YOU ENABLE SOMONE TO ACTUALLY SEE GOD & STAND IN GOD’S VERY PRESENCE.

THIS IS A LOVE THAT GOES BEYOND ROMANCE.

IT EXCEEDS LOVE FOR FAMILY & FRIENDS.

IT’S VASTLY LARGER THAN THE KIND OF LOVE THE WORLD HAS COME TO KNOW.

IT’S A LOVE THAT BRINGS SOMEONE FACE TO FACE WITH THE DIVINE.

AS LOVERS, AS FRIENDS, AS SERVANTS OF JESUS CHRIST, HAPPY VALENTINE’S DAY.

WHY NOT TRANSFORM A DAY INTO A WAY OF LIFE - A WAY OF LIFE THAT BECOMES A WAY OF LOVE.

AMEN.

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