

“LOVING THE UNLOVABLE”

6 Epiphany – February 15, 2004 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Good morning! Well, did you survive Valentine’s Day yesterday? Did you get that right gift for your loved one? Did you receive that special card you hoped for yesterday? Isn’t interesting that we have a day devoted to love? It has become a commercial success in our world! Think about those Hallmark moments. I’ll share some of mine with you. On Friday, I realized that I still hadn’t gotten my Valentine Day cards. I hustled off to the Hallmark store. I was not alone! I could barely get to the cards! When I did, they were pretty well picked over. Next, it was off to the florist. I’m always amazed at the cost of flowers this time of year (we’ve got to make that profit!). There were flowers packaged, with name cards, waiting to be delivered or picked up all over the floor! Finally, there was the trip to the candy store, where they stood 8 or 10 deep at the cash register. And this is Valentine’s Day!

There is a reality behind this day. First of all, everybody wants to be loved. I have rarely meant someone who thought they were loved too much. Second, some people love another. Finally, not all are loved. It is perhaps this last statement that is partially addressed by the Gospel today. My question is, why do we only a lot one day to love? Is that all there is for us? Why don’t we celebrate love everyday? I think also about the true “Valentines” behind Valentine’s Day. According to legends, they may have been as many as three different Valentines. One was a Roman soldier bringing the Christian faith to others. Another was a Bishop who spread the faith in the face of persecution. A third story talks of a Valentine who was jailed for his faith and wrote letters about the love of God to the jailer’s daughter. In each case, each of these St. Valentines died for the love of Jesus that they sought to share. And there was Pope Pius I who sought to counter the Roman Feast of Lupernelia that took place on February 15th. He made St. Valentine the focus of February 14th.

Whatever the reason, Valentine’s Day has come down to us. As Christians, there is another way for us to understand was it taking place. Dr. Wally Fletcher of the Dialouge Center says the story of Jesus is the story of God’s love. The Gospel of Luke presents to us a Jesus who embodies “immance.” By this we mean that the Gospel of Luke shows us a Jesus who is here and now. He is immediately available to people Jesus makes direct contact with others. This is the love of God made tangible in a person. This is the same Jesus who can’t be contained within the walls of the synagogue (see the story of Nazareth last week). The same applies to Jesus in the Church today. He is not contained in our limited structures and words.

In Luke, Jesus delivers his sermon on the plain. This differs from the account in Matthew. Matthew depicts Jesus as delivering the sermon on the mountain. He depicts Jesus as the new law-giver giving us the new law. Luke wants us to see Jesus on level ground with us. He is not one above us or beyond us. Jesus stands next to us. He is on the same level as we are ... and that is good news! Luke sees the love of God walking, talking, healing and among us in Jesus. This is the love of God that directly touches us and we are changed for the better, forever!

Jesus speaks in the Beatitudes about a love from God that has the power to change another’s pain into hope and new life. This love is available to all, especially those

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whom the world does not love. It is a love for the unloved. Jesus also is speaking to his disciples. A crowd is gathered to hear him, but he is speaking to those who would follow him. Jesus says that his disciples are to love as he loves. They are to help bring the Kingdom of God into being. This is a love marked by action, change, and acceptance. It is not marked by gossip, complaining or judgment. Jesus adds that God is changing the world and that it's time for the disciples (and us) to get on the side of God's live.

The Beatitudes are what the Kingdom of God will be like. These words are not balm for the poor encouraging them to accept their lot and feel good about it. Jesus' Beatitudes speak to a radical hope that believes love can and will make a difference in our lives right now! My New Testament Professor, Reginald Fuller talks about how the beatitudes in Luke contain contrasts between blessings and woes. The four blessings talk about: the poor, who recognize the need for God; the hungry, who know what it means to be seeking; the weeping, who know what it means to yearn for joy; and, the rejected, those not connected or accepted, who are most open to God. The four woes are not rejections but warnings. They speak of: the rich, who find no need for God; the full, who see no reason to seek; the laughing, who have think they have it all; and, the accepted, the popular, who don't want or need God. These are the people who have no relationship with God. They don't see that need ... until the major crisis strikes.

Jesus says it is the disciples (and our) job to love as God would love. We are to meet the hurting people where they are now. It's not up to us to make others over in our own image. We are to help others to acknowledge God's love, and how it is available to all. We are to feed, heal and proclaim that love to all. Jesus reminds us that God loves us, and we are to do likewise. One further note, our failure to love others not only hurts others, it hurts God. It is time for us to be like the disciples and bring the love of God to all.

There is a problem with us, however. We forget about God and God's love. There is a story of a young couple with a child who were expecting their second child. They wanted their little girl to understand that another person was coming into their life. The parents were unsure of the little girl's reaction to the new baby. There was lots of talk and questions to see if their firstborn would understand and not feel rejected. Then it came, the question that makes so many parents tremble? "Where do babies come from?" she asked. There was a pause. Was this the time for her first class of sex education? The mother responded, "Babies come from heaven and God!" The answer satisfied the little girl. So after, a baby boy came home. One of the first nights, the parents put the children to bed. They heard a noise and arose to investigate. The little girl had gotten up and gone into her baby brother's room. She stood by the crib and the parents watched cautiously from the door cracked open. Little sister climbed into the crib and snuggled by the baby brother. "Tell me," she whispered, "What does God look like? I've forgot!" The problem is that we forget God and we forget about love. We make it only a once in a time event, like Valentine's Day.

Last night, Diane (my wife) and I decided to go out to the movies. We wanted something light, humorous and a little romantic. We settled on going to see Drew Barrymore and Adam Sandler in "50 First Dates." It was cute and enjoyable. It's a movie about a young

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woman who tragically lost her short-term memory in a car accident. She forgets everything that happens that day. She can only remember life up to the day before the accident. It's a movie about a young man who can't make commitments. He goes through a series of romances until he meets the young woman. He falls in love with her, and spends every day from then on trying to get her to fall in love with him over and over again! No that's love! It is persistent, self-sacrificing, accepting, caring and motivated!

The movie made me think about God and the Divine love that seeks us out over and over again. We might call the sermon today, Jesus' 50 first loves! It is Jesus who reaches out to us in love, especially the unloved. He brings this love to everyone. The love of God is not based on who we are, or what we do, or where we live or how much we know. It is a gift. It is free. It is life-giving. The Holy Scriptures tell us a lot about this love: the greatest of these is love; for God so loved the world; God saw that it (creation) was good (loved); God is love; love one another as I have loved you ...

We are the ones who forget about god and love. God doesn't forget and doesn't stop loving us. We have the short-term memory lost. We look for love in all the wrong places. God's love is unconditional and true. Our love is often conditional and false. It is through Jesus that God shows us love. His message is that we are loved. The message is that love is changing the world. This love looks at us and the world differently. It brings new life and hope wherever it comes.

The Beatitudes talk about a new love. Jesus gathers his disciples and teaches them about the new reality from God. The whole point of sermons and our Sunday worship, Says Professor William Willmon of Duke, is to help us see God's love. If we can see it, we can begin to live it and act it out in our lives. We gather to worship to be reminded what God wants. Jesus says God offers a love that will bring us into the Kingdom of God. We come each week to get a glimpse of this love. We are invited to become part of the vision and the radically new world that God is forming.

What we are left with today is an invitation to become part of God's love story. The Bible talks about seeing the way of love. Now we are to embrace it and be part of it. Today, we are to remember God, and remember that we are all loved by God. We are to live into the love of God by becoming ambassadors of that love to all whom we meet. All it requires is suspending our judgments, letting go of our preconceived ideas and prejudices. We are to see and act the way of God's love. We are to remember, to fall in love with God and the world over and over, day after day. This is what it means to be a Christian.