

February 12, 2012

The National Presbyterian Church

## Something Beautiful for God

Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; John 12:1-8

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Well as you know by now this coming Tuesday is Valentine's Day or Saint Valentine's Day, a day that is celebrated all over the world in honor of somebody we hardly know anything about. Even the Catholic church admits that we know just about nothing about Saint Valentine. They are the guardians of the 'Saints of the church' and they tell us that Valentine actually could be one of three people and we don't know which one: similar men who all lived three centuries after Christ was born, and, surprisingly, all of whom were beheaded. And that's about it. That's about all we know about Saint Valentine.

In fact given the ignorance about him the Catholic church struck Valentine's Day off the liturgical calendar in 1969 leaving us in the secular world to keep on celebrating this person we hardly knew anything about. Though to begin with, like many 'holy-days,' in all likelihood, Valentine's Day may well have been originally secular: a non-Christian 'holiday' turned into a Christian holiday, probably in the days of the Roman Empire. In the case of Valentine's day, some people, for example, have suggested that the Roman festival of Lupercalia, lies in the background: a fertility festival in February awaiting the arrival of spring. And then there's another legend (and I can hardly find any in between), a thousand years later, going into the 15th Century in France where the Duke of Orleans sent some sort of a Valentine's card to his wife but that's pretty vague isn't it?

But that's just about all we know about the origins of this occasion. There is speculation and uncertainty in abundance. But about one

thing related to Valentine's Day there is no uncertainty and no speculation and that is this: that this coming week across the world there will be over a billion, this is a fact, a billion Valentine's cards that are going to be sent (and I suspect the China market hasn't begun to open yet). So a billion around the world are going to be sent from one hopeful person to another.

And while many of those cards may just be opened and thrown away and card companies are grateful you bought them and they're smiling all the way to the bank, *there are going to be some other cards that are sent and for somebody it's just going to make their day.* It's going to make their life worthwhile, to hear somebody else say through this vehicle, this little card, ***"I love you. You matter to me. I am grateful that I know you."*** There are some people who desperately need to hear those words, and those 'vehicles' – a card or roses or chocolates or whatever they may be – may be the very thing that enables somebody else who can't quite get it out, to say those words that somebody else needs to hear. And so often it's true, isn't it? The words or feeling are in here, in our heart, and we want to express it, but sometimes it never quite gets spoken or shown.

Many of you are probably familiar with one of the great love letters of all time. It was first read on television in 1990, in Ken Burns' documentary on the Civil War. It's a letter from Major Sullivan Ballou written in July 1861 to his wife Sarah, back home in Rhode Island. He is about to fight in the battle of Bull Run where he is going to lose his life. And a week before his death on July the 14th 1861 he writes these memorable words:

My very dear Sarah,

My love for you is deathless. It seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but omnipotence could break. And yet my love of country comes over me like a strong wind and bears me unresistably on with all these chains to the battlefield.

The memories of the blissful moments I've spent with you come creeping over me and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them for so long, and hard it is for me to give them up and burn to ashes the hopes of future years when God willing we might still have lived and loved together and seen our sons grown up to honorable manhood around us.

If I do not return, my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you.  
And when my last breath escapes me on the battle field it will  
whisper your name.

Forgive my many thoughts and the many pains I have caused you.  
How thoughtless and foolish I have often times been. But, oh  
Sarah, if the dead can come back to this earth and flit unseen  
around those they loved I shall always be near you in the gladdest  
days and the darkest nights. Always, always. Sarah do not mourn  
me dead. Think I am gone and waiting for thee, for we shall meet  
again.

Think for a moment about what it would have been like to be Sarah  
Ballou receiving that letter. Hearing of her husband's death shortly  
after reading the letter.

Or, vice versa, receiving the letter shortly after hearing the news of  
his death. It would have been powerful. Surely it would have been  
uplifting. Surely it would have been a moment of enormous  
gratitude: evoking joyful memories even in the midst of grief,  
rejoicing in what had been shared.

What a wonderful moment to contemplate! BUT, contemplating is  
all we can do with it, because neither of these scenarios actually  
happened. And we know this because this letter was never mailed.  
It was never sent to Sarah. It was found in Major Ballou's pocket  
when his body was later returned to Rhode Island. In his jacket  
pocket! never received by Sarah, never mailed, never sent! She read  
it later, probably, but at *that* moment, that poignant moment what  
would have helped enormously was never heard or read

How sad that is when love so wonderful as this is not expressed.  
Sad for those who never receive the news and sad, too, when  
somebody who loves just never gets around to sharing it, but keeps  
it all bottled up within them.

Thomas Carlyle was a renowned Scottish author in the 18th  
Century who was known to be hard to live with [Now I don't  
know of any Scots who are hard to live with (!) . . . though you  
might ask my wife Currie about that after the service is over] . .  
. Carlyle loved his wife, Jane, but he rarely told her of his love.

And then unexpectedly and tragically she died. His friend and biographer James Froude writes about Carlyle's reaction to this moment of her death. When he realizes that too late there were things he ought to have done that he had left undone. This is what Froude writes about Carlyle (in *Thomas Carlyle: a history of his life in London, 1834-1881*: Vol. 2 p. 346). He says:

*Carlyle was looking through Jane's papers, notebooks and journals and old scenes came mercilessly back to him in the vistas of the mournful memory. In his long sleepless nights he recognized too late what she had felt and suffered under his childish irritabilities. His faults rose up in remorseless judgment and as he had thought too little of them before, so now he exaggerated them to himself in his helpless repentance. 'Oh,' he cried again and again, 'Oh if I could see her but once more were it but for five minutes to let her know that I always loved her, through all of that but she never died know it. Never.'*

'If I could!' What desolate words! William Barclay commenting on this passage (in his commentary on John) writes, "there is a time for doing and saying things and when the time has passed where the tide has turned it can never be said or done again." How sad when love is unexpressed!

- *Who knows what never happened because nothing was said.*
- *Who knows what might have happened if something had been said and some life that was shriveled up began to grow again and to blossom and flourish simply because words were spoken that opened up a new vista and sense a new person was.*

How sad love is when it's unexpressed -- not only in the person who never hears of it but in the person who has that love, and like Carlyle, never gets around to saying something, but lives with remorse and regret nagging in their souls all their life long . . . because of what might have been.

It's almost as if we were made. It's almost as if there is a divine obligation somehow in the universe in which we need to hear someone somewhere say "I love you!" And as if we need to respond to someone somewhere by saying the words, by letting it all come out unbottled, "I love you too!"

In our passage of scripture today in John Chapter 12 Jesus' friend Mary lets the cork out, takes it out of the bottle and lets the love come out, the secret. She unabashedly, unashamedly, unselfconsciously, tells Jesus that she loves him. Not with words but with an indescribable action, something enormously beautiful and enormously extravagant. In a split second she becomes the center of attention at a dinner where Jesus is eating with his friends, and brings a jar of ointment, kneels down before Jesus and pours out the ointment on Jesus. An unmistakable sign of love. And the cost, the cost is simply enormous (in today's dollars, between 15-25,000 dollars. You can almost hear the gasp of those who realize what is happening. The gasp of the disciples; and then specifically the gasp of Judas (the disciple who will betray Jesus) who immediately begins to think of the monetary value 'wasted' here.

What could this money have been spent on? Surely something more worthy than this could have been done with this perfume? Spent on the poor? It could have gone a long way to feeding the hungry and clothing the naked!

And from what we know of Jesus elsewhere in the gospels it actually would have seemed that he might have agreed.

As John writes his story he often fills it with irony and here it's almost as if Judas (who we know is going to betray Jesus), as if Judas understands *this much* of what Jesus teaches: that for the most part, if we are going to show our love to God made known in Jesus Christ we are to do it by loving others.

Jesus says it so clearly in the 25th Chapter of Matthew's gospel. He says explicitly to his disciples and to you and me, that when we feed the hungry, when we give blankets to those who are cold, when we give drink to the thirsty, when we clothe the naked, visit prisoners, welcome strangers, it's as if we are doing it to him. This is how we show him our love for him – for the most part, by loving others.

And these expressions of love are not mere suggestions that we follow if we feel like it: these expressions are commands! These loving actions are to be foundational for our life as individuals and together as a congregation: that we pour out ourselves in service to others and so make Jesus known and so make our love for him known.

At first blush Judas is right! What a waste! . . . But Jesus doesn't say he's right. Because what Judas misses, and I think probably what everybody except Mary misses, in this situation is that something else is going on here at this moment, something which is unique, singular.

Let me put it like this. It's as if Jesus turning to the disciples responds in this way, referring to the poor always being with you, not a harsh word, but a true word. As if to say

“Look, in the days ahead, when I'm gone and when people are to come to know that you love me, yes, you must show that love by being my hands and feet, by touching the lives of those who are poor (literally and spiritually) in all kinds of practical ways. This is what you are to do with people in need and there is plenty of opportunity for that.

But in this moment Mary has seen something that in time you all will see. She has come to realize that I am on my way to my death and while from one perspective it is tragic, from another perspective it is not tragic at all: it is a gift of my love to you – a priceless gift that I offer to you! I will die for you! – and Mary gets it. She understands that this death that is “a death for her.” It is my Valentine to her: a Valentine which says unmistakably, engraved in the nails that will be driven through my hands, and in the ground in which my cross will be planted, ‘I love you and my love will never change.’ And at such a moment as this, when a person sees that this is the nature of my love for you, -- well, such a moment is the right time for an extravagant irrational response to me . . . to share a Valentine back.”

And she has seen it, as others will see it in time. Ahead of Jesus' death she has begun to see it.

- Somehow because of what Jesus has done for Mary in the past, Mary knows that Jesus loves her. He's let it out of the bottle: he has loved her!
- And somehow Mary grasps that that love will continue to flow to her, even from, and especially in his death – which she (and perhaps a growing number of others) realizes is now inevitable.

- And somehow Mary feels compelled to respond unabashedly, unashamedly, without being self conscious, in a way that is beautiful and extravagant. Like the Psalmist in our first scripture reading, Psalm 116, who just comes out and says it: "I love the Lord!"

Not that Jesus really needed this gift, this perfume. But like Thomas Carlyle she was the beneficiary. She needed in a sense to do it for herself. It was the truth: she loved him! And letting the truth out was in a sense a relief to the soul, bringing her to the very core of her existence: the need to be loved and to share that love in response.

- How wonderful this week – thoughts of love will be shared in all kinds of ways. Some of them will be corny, there's no doubt about that. But in the midst of them some of them will be deadly serious and profoundly true and desperately needed.
- How wonderful when others have told us that we were loved. Think back to some time when somebody said that to us and our shriveled souls were somehow set free by that knowledge.
- How wonderful when we've said something to somebody else, and while we might not have said exactly 'I love you,' we've truly indicated that we valued them, we were grateful. And we saw that look in their eyes, that made them smile and brightened their day, and they smiled back at us.
- How wonderful when we come to see in a singular moment like Mary, that God knows our name, and everything within us, and that in the person of Jesus Christ God has sent a Valentine to us emblazoned on the cross, a valentine message which can never be taken away from us: like holding a card and reading 'he loves me!' And we see it and believe it!
- And how wonderful when we reach that point when we say directly to God with no intermediary in between, "I love you too!"

Of course, at that point Jesus smiles, and then he says "It's good to hear you say it! But having told me you love me, you must go into this world and serve others and through that love for them you will keep on telling *me* that you love me."

Either way, direct or indirectly (to Jesus directly or through others), how wonderful when we say through my life I will live out that love.

Valentine's Day! Sappy sentimental stuff? About somebody we know hardly anything about? Maybe! But keep your eyes and hearts open -- God long ago placed his card in the mail to you and me. I hope you have received it, and know its message is for you, and that you will find great joy in sending many cards straight back to God.

Let us bow before God in prayer. Holy God, how we thank you for coming to us, for descending to our level, simple as it is so that we would know forever that you love us. May we know the truth and the power in saying that we love you. Help us to do something, say something, be something beautiful for you. Amen.

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