

So many heavy things these days... but today is Valentines day! So we'll do well to keep things light (I hear there is a little party game about love at the close of worship). And I'll do well if I keep things short! So, the short version of St. Valentine: He lived in the time of Roman rule, healed a girl of blindness, would not renounce his faith in Christ, did secret Christian weddings, converted people while in jail, and ultimately was killed, martyred, and named a saint in the Catholic Church... OK, actually a heavy story, so let's keep things light:

Have you heard the one about the famous child psychologist? who looked out the window and saw children walking on his sidewalk of fresh cement? He was about to rush out and yell at them, when his wife said, Hold on dear, you know that you LOVE children! Yes, he snapped, I love them in the abstract, not in the concrete!

Yes, LOVE is the main topic of the day. And actually it does tie in with the gospel reading for this Transfiguration Sunday. In this story of Jesus going up the mountain with 3 disciples, divine words heard from a "cloud" grab our attention: "This is my Son, the Beloved; Listen to Him!" There you have it; Jesus is called THE BELOVED. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase says: This is my Son, "marked by Love." There was a dazzling light around Jesus, but more important than the shining aura is the Love that was its source. The main identifying mark of Jesus is LOVE! And we know this to be the main characteristic of God as well; the Hebrew Psalms say over and over: "His Steadfast Love endures forever!" Love ... the principal mark of Jesus, the principal mark of God.... and the principal mark of the Holy Spirit in all of us who follow this Way of Love! We ascribe "perfect love," unconditional love, only to God, since only Divine love can be truly steadfast, forgiving and unconditional... or some people add: Divine love is God spelled backwards (dog!).

For we know, all too well, that human love can be difficult: fleeting, imperfect, inconsistent, and surely not unconditional. For love is not just a feeling or something in the abstract; it is in the "concrete"(!), in the particulars of day to day living. We often hear that

the devil is in the details, which means that God can also be in the details! In little acts of service, even things like chores. There are concrete questions and conflicts that arise in any household: who takes out the trash, what belongs in trash, (versus recycle bin), how early or late it's OK to make noise, who takes the dog out, who does the vacuuming, when and how is laundry done, who changes the diapers, and what is the best way to load a dishwasher (surely there are right and wrong ways!)... and many more areas for possible conflict in family life or group living.

Imperfect love. Have you heard the one about the older couple holding hands in the back row of the church? ... The preacher comes down the aisle after the service and says, "I really admire you for your love... all these years of marriage and you still hold hands during worship!" "Oh pastor," the woman replies, "I just hold his hand so he'll stop cracking his knuckles!" ... Another version of this story was told to me by my mother: she was so surprised to notice her parents on the couch holding hands after a fight, so she asked them why on earth would they be holding hands! ... My grandfather just grinned and said: "I'm just holding her hand so she won't hit me!" Yes, steadfast love can be difficult in marriages and families and friends. The key to lasting love, steadfast love, is learning how to forgive, how to live in grace, learning the language of Jesus, our teacher and savior. Again, the words heard on the mountain top were: "This is my Son, marked by Love, Listen to him." Paul echoes these words by saying that the glory of God, the radiance and light of God is found "in the face of Jesus." If we are take our little light and let it shine, we will do well to listen to Jesus, study his "face," his Way.

I want to spend just a brief moment on this word "face"... We hear of the face of God, and the face of Jesus. Moses reported that the face of God shines so much that people needed to veil their own faces, cover their eyes, lest they be blinded or die. When Moses came down from the mountain the people did just that until the glory faded from Moses. The story of Jesus in dazzling radiance was

similar in that he descended the mountain telling his 3 close disciples not to talk of what had happened. The dazzling radiance obviously faded as they went about the earthly work of teaching and healing the sick. Though the glorious light of Jesus face may have diminished some in his day to day work, the source of that light, that never ended, was his LOVE. Yes, steadfast love, love that could even share other's suffering, love that could always forgive, love that crossed boundaries to spend time with the outcasts, the sick, the strangers, the enemies... love that would forgive while hanging on the cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!" (even when the other is not capable of understanding the effects of his or her words or actions). Yes, Jesus showed incredible love, amazing grace.

Also, it doesn't take a psychologist to tell us that something about a parent's face, especially the mother's face, is crucial for babies to know that they are valued and loved in this world. I think psychologists use words like "mirroring" regarding the maternal-infant bond; babies learn to smile and to laugh and feel love from those very early interactions. How very sad when any child feels neglected, not valued, like a nuisance, even told not to cry or make needs known. So many in churches have a bottom line message of God Loves You, because so many humans need to hear that, for no one really receives enough love in life. I always feel a trinitarian approach is helpful: "God loves you." If that doesn't resonate fully, "Jesus loves you." And if that doesn't resonate fully, how about "The Holy Spirit loves you!" ... (the spirit in anyone who has shown you love, because "God IS Love!") So regardless how you view God (as Creator, as Savior, as Universal Spirit), the promise and conviction is that LOVE is present everywhere, available at all times.

In conclusion, if the heavenly voice in the clouds calls Jesus "the Beloved" or the one "marked by Love," his principal characteristic is Love, which implies relationships and community. And divine love is so steadfast, so forgiving, that it includes ALL God's children. Thus, our Jesus is an inclusive Jesus, full of grace.

Unfortunately the church has sometimes had judgmental and exclusive attitudes due to rigid and culture-bound definitions of sin. In the United Church of Christ, we believe the church, if following Christ, must also be “marked by Love” as its principal identity. If Jesus’ face shines with love, so must ours, even if dimly at first. Inclusive, merciful, understanding love is our gift and also our call.

In the following song, I celebrate Love, and especially the fact that like God and Spirit, it is all around, accessible at all times, in all places: we just have to Reach Out and be open to Love.

REACH OUT, by Ross Varney

1. Are you feeling lonely are you feeling blue, no one there to turn to, wondering what to do? Has your heart been wounded, are you feeling low, is your spirit restless wondering where to go? Well,

CHORUS: Reach out to an old friend, reach out to a new friend, reach out for love is all around. Reach out to a neighbor, even to a stranger, reach out, that's the way love will be found.

2. Still there are the times no one can be there, maybe time to pray, to soothe your soul somewhere. Time to take a walk, time to sing a song, maybe shed a tear, when you don't feel strong, And...*CHORUS*

3. When you've been alone just a bit too long, when your prayers feel empty, and everything feels wrong, Listen to the master, prayer is more than talk. Got to pick yourself up, got to stand and walk! So...
CHORUS

Happy Valentines Day. Love is surely “all around.” And wherever there is love, that is where God is, for God IS Love. (1John 4:7-8). Amen.