



“Valentine’s Day”
Scripture – Luke 4:1-13
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 14, 2016

When we take an overview of the church’s liturgical year, we note some inspiring seasons on the calendar: Advent, Christmas, Easter. These are uplifting celebrations which focus on the *coming* of Jesus, the *birth* of Jesus and the *resurrection* of Jesus. But today, we embark on the church season that few would select as their favorite – Lent. Tell people you are pining for six weeks of critical self-examination and penitence, and they will provide you with the name of a competent therapist.

Historically, this is the time when the church has wagged its critical finger at us and demanded that we straighten up our lives by getting down on our knees. Old-time preachers summoned up their most intimidating voices to threaten their congregants with Dante’s *Inferno*, badgering them to get right with God before it is too late. And for centuries, it worked. People were motivated by guilt and fear. They felt remorse for not living up to church standards and they were terrified that when they took their final breath, they might wind up in a place where the temp was Fahrenheit 451.

However, the war in Viet Nam, the Civil Rights movement and the Watergate hearings combined to undermine the authority of every institution in the land. Since the seventies, nothing has been sacrosanct. Not only is the government fair game for severe scrutiny, but schools, hospitals, police forces, and the church are all questioned as never before.

While it is pathetic that today many turn to athletes and celebrities as their go-to authority figures, the questioning of church policies and dogma was long overdue. For too long, the church seemed more interested in protecting its leaders and controlling the dancing, drinking and sexual behavior of its members, than imitating Jesus in extending compassion, seeking justice and working for peace.

So how should we approach Lent today? Do we revert to the notion of an angry God and plead for mercy? How does that square with the image Jesus paints of a grace-filled father who rushes down the road and throws his arms around his son who finally had the good sense to come home?

This year, the first Sunday of Lent falls on the same day as Valentines’ Day – a rare occurrence that happened only twice in the 20th century – the last time being 1937. It makes me wonder if this unique confluence of Valentine’s Day with the first Sunday in Lent might coax us to view Lent from a different perspective.

For those who think that Valentine's Day was merely an invention of a greeting card company, I assure you that this holiday was celebrated long before Hallmark cards hit the stores. There are different stories about the origin of Valentine's Day, but all agree that they go back to an early church martyr – Saint Valentine.

One of the problems with nailing down the Holy Day-turned-holiday, is that there were three different Christian martyrs named Valentine. What we do know is that in 496, Pope Gelasius I established Saint Valentine's Day on the Christian calendar. What we do not know is how honoring this early martyr became associated with love and romance.

One theory points "to the ancient Roman festival of Lupercalia, which was observed February 13 through 15. This was an archaic rite connected to fertility. Apparently, Pope Gelasius I abolished Lupercalia and inserted in its place Valentine's Day. Given the switch, perhaps Saint Valentine, who had nothing to do with romance, got morphed into the mascot for a fertility rite. And you know what fertility rites lead to: flowers, chocolate, sweet notes and a nice dinner. And then maybe you get the fertility rite."¹

There is another theory about connecting Saint Valentine with love. One of the Saint Valentines was apparently imprisoned for performing weddings for soldiers who were forbidden to marry. After all, if you want to turn young men into killers who will sacrifice their lives for the empire, you do not want them thinking about their wives and children back home.

Whatever the origin and history of Valentine's Day, it is a time to focus our attention on who captures our heart. To whom do you give your heart?

Each year, Camilla and I send Valentines' cards to our grandchildren and tuck a small bill inside the card. This year I started to ask Camilla if she thought the grandchildren would rather have a glitzy five dollar card and a one dollar bill, or a one dollar card and a five dollar bill. Before I finished my question, I knew the answer. Get the Dollar Store card and slip in the bill with Lincoln's face on it.

The fact is, the printed words on the cards mean little to them. They want to read what we write in their cards. They want to read how special they are to us; how proud we are of them; how they will always be our Valentine.

So, what on earth does any of this have to do with our gospel lectionary reading for the first Sunday of Lent? Before you say, "Absolutely nothing!" let me take a stab at making a connection.

Each year, the lectionary invites us to begin Lent by pondering the story of Jesus being tempted after spending 40 days alone and without sustenance in the wilderness. When I reflect on this passage, I am struck by what Jesus is tempted to do. It is not simply that he is tempted to make himself the star of the show by turning rocks into rye or skydiving from the pinnacle of the temple without a chute or becoming chief executive over the kingdoms of the world.

No, what struck me is this: he is tempted to give his heart to someone other than God. After being tempted to worship Satan, Jesus says, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" This is the primary temptation of Jesus. It is also our fundamental temptation – to give our heart to someone or something other than God – notoriety, financial success, power, there are several candidates vying for our top spot.

How do you give your heart to God? By renewing and deepening your bond with God. You do it by building into your life the spiritual discipline of daily prayer – giving thanks to God each morning for the gift of another day and asking God to help you be fully awake every hour for signs of grace.

Prayer reminds us that the world is both material and spiritual, and that the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control² – bring purpose and vitality to our lives.

God is above, below, around and within you; not controlling you, but blessing you; not coercing you, but inspiring you. God knows your thoughts and feelings. God feels your joys and wounds. God responds to your failures by urging you to take a better path next time. God is thrilled with your acts of kindness and celebrates your successes.

You give your heart to God by asking God to fill you with a Christ-like Spirit so that you may be an agent of God's love in the world by countering malice with mercy and cruelty with compassion. When you fix a pot of soup for homeless men and women, when you sit and listen to someone pour out his grief, when you take a stand against racism, when you give generously, and when you serve as a church officer, you give your heart to God.

A colleague tells of a man in his congregation who works on two Habitat for Humanity houses each year. "Some years he works on five or six Habitat projects, but he made God a promise that he will always do at least two. He has honored his commitment for over thirty years. What is the source of his passion?"

"After returning from an overseas war, he struggled to readjust. He had no family support, so he drifted from town to town and job to job. The one thing he did have was a talent for carpentry, so he could usually find a building site that needed an extra hand. Finally, in a small Midwestern town, he signed on to help build a development of six moderately sized houses. He told the foreman that he would be happy not only to do carpentry but also to provide security each night. He brought his sleeping bag with him and spent the nights on the job site. He did that, house by house. The owner of the company was impressed by the man's skills and his commitment. So, at the close of the project which was a year in the making, the owner took the man aside and said: 'I want to thank you for all you have done. And, I want you to stay on with our company.' Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys and said, 'The sixth house we built is yours.' The carpenter said, 'I can't pay for it.' to which his employer answered, 'You'll find a way.' His volunteer work on Habitat Houses is how he repays the owner for his amazing gift."³

How do you repay God for the amazing gift of life you have been given?

As I mentioned, it is a rare occurrence for Valentine's Day to fall on the First Sunday of Lent. But, perhaps Valentine's Day provides an excellent lens through which we interpret this normally austere season of the church year. Give your heart to God and see how your love begins to multiply.

NOTES

1. Lillian Daniel, *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough*, (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), p. 189.
2. Galatians 5:22-23.
3. Michael Brown, "Does Baptism Matter?" day1.org, January 13, 2013.