

Mark 9:2-9

It is Valentine's Day, the last Sunday of Epiphany, the Transfiguration, and we are on the precipice of Lent – it is a full day...which means that you and I need to be reminded of the enduring truth that one of my favorite seminary professors used to frequently tell us:

You are more messed up than you think you are. And you are more loved than you think you are.

I dare say that the theme of the Gospel story of the Transfiguration is one of love on this Valentine's Day – it is a message of God's love for us and the call to love others. You see, in the story of the transfiguration, which every few years lands on Valentine's Day, we hear God's message of love to Jesus. In this story Jesus is with his followers on the mountaintop right alongside Moses and Elijah and then, as Jesus is transfigured, we hear the voice of God saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, listen to him." The two times we hear God's voice described as being audible in the New Testament – the words are a message of love – the love God has for God's Son. The word, "beloved" here comes from the Greek word "agape" which refers to absolute unconditional love. It is spoken first at Jesus' baptism and secondly at the Transfiguration. It is that same message of love we proclaim upon the newly baptized when we are heralded as children of God...loved by God.

And our world needs love right now more than ever – this message of love is imperative. Scripture tells us that we are able to love others because God first loved us. Still, we often doubt God's love for us. And I confess, it's something I struggle with at times. I'm certain that God loves other people but I have often struggled to find that certainty for myself. And yet, God's message of love that day on the mountaintop is, I believe, for every one of us- for all children of God. And God's message of love continues to come to us, not only through God's Word and in these important Gospel stories, but, I believe, through the many messages around us...and we can hear them if we're paying attention.

One Valentine's Day when I was in seminary, the professor was actually lecturing on the theology of God's love and someone had begun passing around a bowl of those little chalky candy hearts. It passed by me the first time and I picked just one up and it read, "I love you." I smiled as I thought, "It's almost like God wanted

me to hear that today"-in the lecture and the candy. The bowl came around a second time – I picked another one and read the message, it said, "I truly love you." I smiled again and this time whispered, "Thanks God." The bowl came around one final time, I picked one more and read it, it said, "Love me?" Honestly a few tears filled my eyes as I sat in class and prayed: "Yes God -I love you. Thank you for loving me." I felt a little silly – it was just candy on Valentine's Day- but ever since then I have wondered about the messages we come across and whether we can hear God in them.

And then a friend told me her story of love from God. And I shared the story few years ago in my church in Oregon. My friend's husband had recently left her and she was barely scraping by with several children and it was her first Valentine's Day alone. She said that she found herself sinking into a terrible, deep depression that day. She was living at the time in a tiny house 30 miles away from any town and, she said, "The loneliness was almost too much to bear that day." Her son, only four years old at the time, went outside to play. A few moments later he returned with a giant red heart shaped mylar balloon filled with helium with the words printed on it, "I LOVE YOU." He handed it to his mother and she said, "Happy Valentine's Day!" She said with astonishment, "Where did you get this?" Her son responded very matter-of-factly, "I asked God to help me get a Valentine's gift for my mommy because, I told God, she's lonely, and then this balloon landed in our yard. God sent it for you."

The Sunday I told that story, I had something similar interesting happen. That afternoon my daughter Charlotte, who was 9 years old then, came into the house and asked me where the balloon outside in our front yard had come from. I asked her, "What balloon?" She responded, "the heart shaped balloon that says "I love you" on it." I jumped up to look, thinking she was joking, but there it was: a beautiful heart shaped mylar balloon with that very message. I realized instantly that someone from church had followed up on the sermon story and was offering a wonderful, divine message to remind my family of God's love for us. I never found out who left the balloon.

But...You are more loved than you think you are- you- God's child- the beloved. And we, who know we are loved by God, have the honor of sharing that message of love with others. How will you share it?

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and we will begin our Lenten journey. Our adult education on zoom will consist of unpacking the invitation of Lent to observe a Holy Lent through several practices: Self examination, Repentance, Prayer, Meditating on God's Word, Fasting, Almsgiving and self-denial. These are basics of our spiritual practice – and all spiritual practice ultimately leads us to the joyful knowledge of God's love for us – because the closer we draw to God in these postures of grace – these practices of holiness – the more deeply we learn and sense the love of God in our lives – and are then more empowered to share that love with others.

Our nation and our community -the Church itself- need the message of God's love more than ever. We continue to wrestle with the pain of division and hatred that has come to express itself more openly than I have ever seen in my lifetime in our society. The message of God's love can only be communicated when we guard our hearts and our words from speaking hatefully or disdainfully of others. The message of love can only be communicated when we choose words that convey grace and love and when we choose actions of love. How will you soak in the love of God this Lent? And...I ask again, how will you share the message of God's love to others?

You ARE more loved than you think you are. Amen.