

February 14, 2010
Last Sunday after the Epiphany
The Very Rev. William Lupfer

Happy Valentines' Day. (varied audience response) Thank you. We don't have a Valentine's Day greeting, do we? ("We love you!" from parishioner, followed by chuckling, then applause.) What? (laughter) When I first told my wife I loved her, she said "What?" (laughter) She wanted to hear it again. And so, she has heard it again and again. I used to hate Valentines' Day, because I thought it was a Hallmark holiday. Until I did proper research, and learned that I was wrong. Let me share some of my wisdom with you.

There are some saints named Valentine. One was martyred, we think, in 197 Common Era. Another was martyred in the late 200's, Common Era. Pope Gelasius, at the end of the 400's, made them saints. And then he also outlawed a Roman pagan festival that was all about fertility and sacrifice. And Pope Gelasius put St. Valentine's Day--St. Valentine's Day, Feastday--right on top of those pagan feastdays. That's how the church grew, by the way. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em...so put Valentine's Day right on top of the old pagan festival, and Christianized it.

It wasn't until Chaucer, in the high Middle Ages, that Valentine's Day began to have a romantic flair to it. And we have wonderfully taken that, and run with it, haven't we? So since we are in an ancient feastday of St. Valentines Day, I would like to read you some love poems. I have three. I think they cover the spectrum.

The first one's on the far side of ecstatic love, that brings union. Love as union. Listen to this.

Wild nights! Wild nights!
Were I with thee
Wild nights should be
Our luxury.

Futile the winds
To a heart in port
Done with the compass,
Done with the chart.

Rowing in Eden
Ah! the sea!
Might I but moor
Tonight in thee?

Ecstatic love poetry...by Emily Dickinson! The woman who spent most of her life in her room - not talking to anyone but her sister. Going to the heights of Heaven, finding union with God and bringing back words that bring us into that same union. I'll never

forget at Divinity School, when my professor--who was a right proper nun--when my professor, Margaret Farley, talked about the advantages of romantic love. And here it is, in Emily Dickinson. That romantic love, brings us to that promise of union. And then if we're properly Christian, we turn our gaze towards God, and we find union with God. Or...as Augustin said, "Our hearts are restless, Lord, until we find rest in thee." Wild nights.

Here's another poem, that's on the exact opposite end of the spectrum. This is, I think, a love poem that talks about separation. And despair. This is by a guy named Chidiock Tichborne. It's called Tichborne's Elegy. Tichborne was a proper Roman Catholic, back in the time of Elizabeth I, in England. He preferred to worship in the papist way, which had become outlawed, and then treasonous. So he joined a group. He was young and rash...he joined a group that tried to assassinate Queen Elizabeth. Like most who tried that, he got caught, was hauled off to the Tower of London, where people of treasonous intent went. And he had time to contemplate his upcoming execution. In that dark cell, he wrote these words:

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain.
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,
And all my good is but vain hope of gain.

The day is passed, and yet I saw no sun.
And now I live. And now my life is done

My tale was heard, and yet it was not told
My fruit is fallen, and yet my leaves are green.
My youth is spent, and yet I am not old.
I saw the world, and yet I was not seen.

My thread is cut, and yet it is not spun.
And now I live, and now my life is done.

I sought my death and found it in my womb.
I looked for life and saw it was a shade.
I trod the earth, and knew it was my tomb.
And now I die, and now I was but made.

My glass is full, and now my glass is run.
And now I live, and now my day is done.

Pretty tough words, aren't they? These come from about 400 years ago, written by a condemned death-row prisoner. But somehow they make it to our hearts, and our ears today. Isn't it fascinating, that Tichborne...who thought everything was over...isn't it fascinating that his words, and the agony of his heart, could come to us today...through the Internet, no less? Fascinating...how when we see our life as over...it continues, and keeps going...even in Tichborne, as he waited in the Tower of London.

So we have ecstatic love poetry, and we have that desolate separation from life itself. Let's go to the middle. The middle is from Margaret Atwood. She's one of my favorite writers, a Canadian. She writes a poem called

Habitation
Marriage is not
a house, or even a tent.

It is before that, and colder:

The edge of the forest, the edge
of the desert.
The unpainted stairs
at the back where we squat
outside, eating popcorn.

The edge of the receding glacier
where painfully, and with wonder
at having survived even
this far

We are learning to make fire.

Love is learning to make fire. I think these poems take us right into our Scripture today, where we see the fire of the Holy Spirit, and the people of God of those ancient times. I love hearing about Moses, as he walks with his people on the path of Exodus. And that path becomes a familiar path, for all of us. That path from slavery...to life. But it's a path where we are forced to lose everything. The people of Israel complained as they were journeying towards freedom, because their exodus looked so much like death. In fact, it took them 40 years to move to that Promised Land, right to the edge, and then they stopped for 40 more years! Joshua went in, and he came back and told them how great it was! "It was a land filled with milk and honey...why are you in the desert?" But they waited, because even that transition towards life is scary and difficult.

So we on this Valentine's Day, with this ancient Scripture, ground ourselves into that essential rhythm of our faith...out of slavery and death, into something that feels overwhelming...and on into new life. Here we hear a little snippet of Moses on the Exodus path with God's people. And we know from reading other snippets of the story, that Moses will come down from the mountain repeatedly. One time when he does, he is betrayed even by his brother, his friend, Aaron. Moses comes down from the mountain, and there is Aaron leading all the people to worship the golden calf. That beautiful, very valuable, tangible image...the golden calf. Moses comes back down, off the mountain, sees this, and he's horrified. So he pulls God's people back towards the difficult task of being in relationship with God...making fire together. Moses pulls God's people back.

When I look at Scripture, it's often tempting to put myself in one of the characters of the story. And in this story, I've usually put myself in Moses' position...wondering what it

would be like. But I read something recently, that recommends to all of us, that we put ourselves in the people of Israel's position in this story...as they turn from the golden calf, back to the living presence of God, through Moses. Imagine that that's part of the ancient rhythm of our soul as well...to turn from what is concrete, and apparently valuable, back into that intangible love of God...that comes to us in strange ways...that sometimes even needs to be veil.

On this Valentine's Day, we're dealing with ancient rhythms of life and wisdom, through the Scripture. We come to Jesus on the Holy Mountain, where he is transfigured. Now it's fascinating that, that Holy Mountain that Jesus is transfigured...is actually an ordinary mountain. It's only extraordinary because this happens. Before then, it was a mountain, that Jesus used to go to, to escape the crowd. I've been on that mountain, or at least the one that people say is the mountain. It's actually a hill. I was there in April. It was green...fields all around...with this little round hill..it was kind of cute! I had imagined Mount Hood! Something tough and craggy and difficult. This thing was easy. Most of us right now could go walk up this Holy Mountain. It was an ordinary mountain.

The extraordinary piece was the spiritual perspective that was there, and the courage of the people who gathered around Jesus...the courage that they had...to walk that ancient rhythm of life, and see God's presence and God's love through Jesus. Even in that moment though...that moment of radical dazzling light...even then they're talking about what Jesus is going to do in Jerusalem. Even then, they're talking about that still-ancient rhythm of going from death, into life...and how Jesus will walk that Pascal mystery, in his own life. It's a profound transfiguration that we see through Scripture. And yet, other Scripture shows us that it's actually not very profound. They never preach it in Acts...never comes back up. John doesn't even talk about it in his Gospel. In second Peter...that was written later...so we know that was important...that mentions the Transfiguration. But the disciples never bring it up again. It seems to be almost a private experience that they had...maybe like Tichborne, when he wrote his elegy in the Tower of London. Maybe like Margaret Atwood, when she realizes that a committed mutual relationship is about becoming...about creating fire...about doing something outrageous, that brings energy and warmth.

And so...Happy Valentine's Day. I pray that you may remember the one you love, and those you love, and that as you do so, you'll walk that ancient path of faith with courage, through that overwhelming reality of life, into the unity of God's love. May we make fire together.