

## "Four Stories of Love"

Psalm 146; Mark 12:38-44

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 15, 2015 – Transfiguration Sunday – Rev. Ronald Botts

Today I have four stories of love for you, after all it's Valentine's weekend. While each story is quite different, there's something similar in all of them. Listen...

Once there was an African boy who brought a Christmas gift to his teacher. He was a poor child, but he valued the education that he was getting and, in particular, the love and caring of this one special lady. It was clear that she wanted him to succeed and she spent additional hours with him each week to ensure that he understood his lessons.

He wanted to do something nice so he brought her a gift for the holidays: a magnificent, colorful seashell. He laid it on her desk with a bright ribbon around it that he had tied himself. When she saw it she beamed and said how beautiful it was. She knew this large shell was no ordinary find, but was a rare specimen. It would have, no doubt, brought many dollars on the commercial market.

The teacher asked her young student where he had found the shell, for she was aware of only one beach where they might occasionally be discovered. This stretch of seashore was many miles away from where they lived. Glad that she was pleased, he acknowledged that this was indeed where he had found it after making a special trip in hope of such a find.

The teacher was touched by the gift and the extraordinary effort that lay behind it. "Oh," she said, "it's beautiful, but you shouldn't have gone to so much effort just for a gift. It was too far for you to walk."

Instead of basking in the attention his teacher was giving him, the pupil instead turned away, embarrassed. Then he looked up at her with open eyes and smiled broadly. With the sincerity only a child can have, the boy said simply, "The long walk was part of the gift." Her smile in return told him she understood.

Story #2. There was a truly inspiring article in newspapers some time back. The account read like this:

"A little girl wept as big-hearted passengers on a jumbo jet raised the equivalent of \$97,000 in a mid-air collection toward paying for a life-saving operation. Four-year-old Miriam Kadosh, who suffers from a serious liver condition, was flying to Britain for tests at a top London Hospital. She will probably need a liver transplant.

"The pretty, dark-haired child and her mother, Tova, 29, burst out crying as the 450 passengers and crew, who heard about her plight, emptied their pockets. Everyone on board threw money into a suitcase being carried around the jet as it flew over the Mediterranean toward Heathrow Airport. The suitcase, which was filled after it came around once, was carried around a second time to cheers and applause. Astonished crew and passengers

gaped with disbelief when the collection in a dozen different currencies added up to \$97,000.

"The El Al flight was carrying mainly British holidaymakers home from Tel Aviv. A group of businessmen helped bump up the fundraising to its final tally."

Story #3. This is a very old Jewish story, a fable which is told to children in order to explain how God decided where the Temple in Jerusalem should be built. Here's how it goes:

Centuries ago two brothers were partners in a grinding mill in Jerusalem. At the end of each day they took the grain they had milled and divided it equally. Half they put into one sack, the other half they put into the second. Two men, two sacks, everything divided equally. This they did night after night, year after year.

One evening the bachelor brother said to himself, "This is not right. I am alone and don't need much, but my brother has a wife and family. He deserves the larger share." So, sneaking back into the mill each night, he took part of his share and poured it into his brother's sack. He knew that no one would be the wiser.

The married brother also thought one night, "This is not right. When I am old, I will have children to support me, but my brother will be all alone. He deserves the larger share." So, sneaking back to the mill each night, he took part of his share and poured it into his brother's sack. He was sure he wouldn't be discovered.

Now the two brothers didn't know what was happening, and so could only imagine it a miracle when they found their own sacks full each morning. Both felt right about their decisions to secretly give a bit extra to the other.

One night, however, the two men left home at the same time to go back to the mill. By coincidence they happened to meet on a street corner, each with their sacks in hand. Only then did it become obvious what the other had been doing. And so they fell into each other's arms laughing, but in joy and celebration.

The story goes on to say that God looked down upon the scene with great satisfaction. The Lord saw the sacrificing love of two brothers as they embraced there in the street. Then God said, "Here is where love meets. Here I will build my Temple." And, indeed, this is what happened.

Story #4. Jesus sat outside that very same Temple one evening, long after its construction, and observed a gift being made by a poor widow of the town—a gift of true love to God.

Within the Temple enclosure, but outside the building proper, there were offering boxes. According to Mark, Jesus sat for a while watching people come up to these boxes and leave their offerings. "Many rich people put in large sums," the Gospel states, but the clear implication is that there wasn't much behind those gifts, even though they were often large amounts.

Yet along comes a widow and she drops in two small copper coins, worth about a penny. Perhaps no one else took notice, but Jesus did. She was very intentional in putting her coins

in the collection, not because she wanted to call attention to herself, but because of the devotion with which she approached her act. The coins were not simply a few among others in her purse; they were all she had.

Jesus saw the love for God behind this gift and he turned to his disciples and observed: ".. this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance but she, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had, her whole living."

---

Now this is the time each year when we think particularly about love and celebrate it. While Valentine's Day is certainly one of our most commercialized holidays, it is still one in which most of us take at least a small part. Many of us extend greetings to family or friends, and it's a great time to go out and eat with someone special. The day looks back not to war or revolution but rather commemorates caring, harmony, and hope. It has inspired some of the greatest expressions of the human heart.

The widow's sacrifice reminds me of a poem that Christina Rossetti penned more than a hundred years ago and turned into a Christmas carol. It tells of Christ's birth in its first three verses, but the last verse of the song brings that event home to us. It asks how we shall respond to the good news. Verse four asks, "What can offer, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise one, I would do my part; but what can offer; all my heart."

This Valentine's Day, and really year round, remember that the true gifts are those given out of the generosity of the soul and not for show. When our heart is in our gift, the gift will always be right and appropriate.