

First Presbyterian Church
 Greenfield, Indiana
 Pastor John J. Paulson
 February 13, 2011 Souper Bowl Sunday

Love and Happiness!

Deuteronomy 30: 15 – 20	Choices, Choices, Choices!
Psalm 119: 1 – 8	Obedying leads to happiness!
Matthew 5: 21 – 37	Does Jesus make it more difficult?
I Corinthians 3: 1 – 9	How can we get along?

Informally before the sermon starts: Tomorrow is Valentine's Day, the day we traditionally celebrate love. The history of Valentine's Day isn't very clear. There are legends that there was a priest named Valentine who helped Christians escape Roman prisons.

In another legend, Valentine was a priest who served during the third century in Rome. When Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, he outlawed marriage for young men — they were his crop of potential soldiers. Valentine, realized the injustice of the law, and defied Claudius by continuing to perform marriages for young lovers in secret. When Valentine's actions were discovered, Claudius ordered that he be put to death.

Still another says that he sent the first Valentine himself to a girl that had visited him in prison. He sent her a love note and signed it "your Valentine", a sentiment we still use today.¹

Whatever the origin, Valentine's Day is celebrated by people around the world and gifts of flowers and candy and jewelry are exchanged. I saw one estimate that said that over one hundred fifty million valentine cards are sent every year. That's big business. Add in candy, particularly chocolate, and red and white flowers like roses and carnations, and it is really big business. And it's all about love. Maybe the old saying that "Love makes the world go 'round'" is true. At least around February 14th every year!

¹ <http://www.history.com/topics/valentines-day>

You may be wondering how this ties into scripture. Well, in my thinking, the theme of Valentine's day is the same as the main theme in the Bible: Love and Happiness.

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer! Amen

Love and happiness are themes that run through the entire Bible.

As far as love is concerned, I have heard it said that the Bible is really just one big love story; the story of God and of God's love for all creation. In page after page, book after book, we see God's love and grace revealed. If I had to pick one verse that ties it all together, I think I would pick John 3: 16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."² That is true love, isn't it?

Beginning in Genesis with the love story of Adam and Eve, we find love stories and evidence of love over and over again. Some stories are about positive and perfect love, like the love between Abraham and Sarah, and, some like the story of David and Bathsheba leave us wondering. There is even one whole book in the Bible dedicated to the love between a man and a woman – The Song of Solomon.

But the true love story in the Bible is between God and us. Take the 23rd psalm for instance. Although love is not actually mentioned, we can feel God's love through and through as we read about the good shepherd protecting and watching over us. Call it love or call it grace, it is the way God treats us and cares for us.

The psalmist begins psalm 119 with these words: "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart.." From our New Testament perspective, we might well add: Happy are those who accept God's forgiveness into their lives and forgive their neighbors as well."

This is all about God's grace. The way God reaches out to us and only asks that we reach back and accept what God is offering. That's true love. And the only thing that God expects is that we love God in return and accept his Son as our savior.

² John 3:16 (NIV)

It is a choice that we all have to make. Do we follow the path and walk with God, or do we try to go it alone. Do we follow the path to love and happiness, or do we try some other way that may lead to anger and despair?

I love Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" that talks about life changing decisions we must make:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

I strongly suspect by the fact that you are here this morning or listening to this on one of Dennis Whitson's CDs, that you have made the right decision. The one to seek love and happiness through a strong relationship with our loving, living God.

And, of course there are other life changing decisions we have made as well. If you stop and think about it, no matter how old you are, you have already made many choices of which path you are going to follow into the future; decisions that have brought you to the place you are today. I know I have. Actually many, if not most of those choices made me the person I am. I can look back and see how those choices affected me. The choice to be confirmed at St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran church in Park Ridge, Illinois in the mid 50's was certainly a major one in my life. The choice to go to Lay Pastor training in 1999 was a most significant choice.

Of course these life changing choices don't only involve ourselves, they involve others as well. The choice I made to marry Pat, the choice we made to adopt two children. The choice to move to Indianapolis instead of the many places the Navy wanted to send me to in 1985.

In our scriptures this morning we hear Moses talking to the Chosen People, the descendants of Adam and Eve and Noah and Abraham and Sarah about how they respond to God's outreach of love and grace, about life changing decisions they have to make.

Moses, himself had faced many choices in his life. Some he made correctly, some he didn't. Some choices pleased God, others did not. Yet, God continued to speak through him to the Chosen People.

When we find them this morning, the Israelites are in the plains of Moab, not far from the Dead Sea. It hasn't been long since the escape from captivity in Egypt, and the tribes are making their way to the promised land, with Moses leading the way. He has called a rest stop for the people, and gathered them together to listen to what God has to say to them.

He begins with a love story as he reminds them of God's love. He reminds them of the wonderful and amazing way God helped them escape from the Egyptian army, then, he begins to outline their responsibilities as God's Chosen People. He talks about the benefits of obedience to God's requirements and the possible consequences of disobedience. He talks about the people's choices and how God may respond to their choices. He tells them they can choose one of two paths, as we heard in the Frost poem. One path will lead to God love and God's ways, the other will produce disastrous results for them.

He ends this discussion by summarizing and making their choice clear: He says, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.”³

But, you may say, this is a God of love. Surely God would not abandon the people he chose to be his people in the world, would he?

Moses talks about another element of God’s love and grace, forgiveness.

Moses tells them that if they stray, God gives them a second chance. If they stray from God’s path and later confess and return to God, God will bring them back into God’s favor and once again give them all the benefits of love and grace.

And, aren’t we all fortunate that we have a God who wants all of us to have the benefits of God’s love and grace?

It is through that love that we have the ability to handle the unexpected in our lives. We have an inner peace that non-believers cannot fathom. Although we may not go around with a smile on our face all the time, we have an inner happiness that comes from knowing that God is always with us, always loving us, always reaching out to us in love and grace. That’s true happiness. That’s true love.

In a few minutes we will gather at this table and celebrate God’s love in another way as we celebrate Holy Communion, another one of God’s wonderful gifts to us.

Amen.

³ Deuteronomy 30: 15 - 18