
From Your Valentine

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Ash Wednesday – Year B

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

There was a doctor who lived in Rome during the third century—not in a grand marble palace, but in several small private rooms just above the busy street. His days were filled with people coming in to seek treatment for basic maladies, almost all of which he treated with herbs—homemade concoctions that he made by virtue of going out in the morning, collecting flowers from the fields, and coming back to create what he thought his patients would need for that day. And he loved to go out into the fields, particularly at the beginning of spring, when the flowers were in bloom. It was his favorite time.

One day, a jailer came in with his daughter. He was having some kind of trouble, but his daughter was his primary concern. She had been blind from birth and as he brought her in for healing from the doctor, he really captured the doctor’s heart. And the doctor treated the girl that day, but also said that he would pray for her, because the doctor was also a priest.

Now this was a time when being a priest was a bit more dangerous than it is today, so prayers had to be offered behind closed doors. But every day, and increasingly twice a day, the doctor-priest prayed for this young girl. Over time he began taking her, when her father was busy, out into the field to help him collect the flowers and herbs that he used. Her favorite was the crocus, the flower that bloomed first in the spring.

And this became a symbol of their relationship—the crocus.

One day, when the doctor-priest was expecting the jailer and his daughter to visit, there was a knock on the door. And as he raced to open it, he was greeted instead by Roman soldiers, who had determined that he was a priest.

They arrested him and condemned him to death, but as they took him to the jail, he saw at the door a familiar face—for the jail was managed by the girl’s father. The father saw the doctor-priest and did not know what to do.

Very shortly thereafter, they came to get the doctor, to take him away for the last time, and he asked for a moment and a pencil and paper, so that he could scratch out a note.

He scratched out a note, folded it up, and gave it to the jailer, asking the jailer to give it to his daughter. And the jailer did.

That night, as he handed the note to his daughter, his daughter said, “What is this?”

And the jailer said, “I don’t know.”

And at that moment, a crocus fell out of the paper.

And as she opened the paper, she saw the words inscribed: “From your Valentine.”

This is the story of St. Valentine, an actual person, a Christian, who lived in the third century of Rome, who we remember on this day—which is also Ash Wednesday, of course—because he knew how to give his heart away to God.

And so the story of St. Valentine, I think, ought to prompt all of us to ask that question: “How do we learn to give our heart away to God?”

And there could, I think, be no better time to answer that question than Lent. For it is today that we will receive ashes—ashes which will mark our foreheads, just where the oil marked our foreheads at baptism, the oil that marked us as Christ’s own forever.

The ashes will remind us that our life is a gift, that we are limited, that we don’t control our own destiny, that we are here and even breathe by virtue of the gift of God.

And so what are we to do with that gift? Our Gospel tells us, well don’t focus so much on yourself, you know. You can give away alms, you can say your prayers, but if you do it all in public for your own benefit, there is no reward for you—at least not in heaven.

Because where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

But it’s not as simple as retreating to a dark room or giving gifts away in private. As long as you are prideful about what you have done, as long as you think that your value in the eyes of God or even in other people turns on your own generosity, you are not learning to give your heart away.

So how is it that we learn to give our hearts away? I want to suggest to you a practice and encourage you to adopt it for part of Lent. I call it charitable reading.

In its hardest and most difficult form, it requires you to look at someone you disagree with, don’t understand, really wish would go away, and before responding to the last inane, wrong, stupid comment they just made, find one reason—one reasonable motivation—for why they just said what they said or did what they did.

Charitable, which comes from *caritas*, from love.

It is a way of changing your heart, so that you are looking for the value and dignity of another person. And often, it’s the way of changing their heart when they see the value and dignity in themselves, that you have found.

Charitable reading.

But it doesn’t always have to be this hard.

I found myself the beneficiary of this kind of gift only this morning.

I was sitting in the coffee shop, at my normal table, sipping my normal cappuccino, in my normal moment of stress, self-absorption, panic, and anxiety—I do this every morning.

I’ve got to preach a sermon today; I’ve got a lead a seminar tomorrow; I’ve got a quiet day on Saturday; I’m starting my class on Sunday; and I’ve got deadlines for a writing project. This is not an unreasonable state of anxiety!

But as I found myself absorbed in myself and my own anxiety, suddenly this hand came over my shoulder, dropped a little slip of paper in front of me, and said, “Have a good day.”

At first I was annoyed. Who is this person interrupting my private time?

And then I looked at the piece of paper, and on it was a hand-drawn heart and then a little inscription: “You,” it said, “are an amazing person. You are worth it!”

And I sat up straight, having found a bit of new life, having lost some of my anxiety, just feeling a bit of peace—just because somebody had dropped a note in front of me.

But it got better. Because of course I looked around to see who this was, and I saw this black woman walking through the

coffee shop, dropping notes over the shoulder of each and every patron.

But it wasn't just anybody. It looked like she was the second coming of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*.

She had pigtails that she had dyed red. She was wearing a white fur coat. She had a heart that she had drawn on her cheek. She had on leggings (because she was under the age of 50), but part of them were white furry leggings on top of—get this—red sparkling high-heeled shoes.

I mean, if you don't feel better after that, you need another cappuccino. It was like an angel, and yet I think it gives us an example of charitable reading, this confidence that in each and every person, whether you know them or not, regardless of what stupid, mindless, aimless thing they have just said or done, have value in the eyes of God.

They are a child of God.

And it is good practice for us to look for that value, to name that value, to see that dignity, not only for ourselves, but for them. Sometimes they need us to see that in them, to name that in them, as much as we do

It is, I think, a good way of learning to give our heart away. And it is, I think, exactly what St. Valentine managed to do—seeing the value in a young blind girl and showing her what life was like, to go out and pick crocuses, signaling the beginning of spring.

May you have a holy Lent.

Amen.