

LENT'S LOVE LETTERS

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Feb. 14, 2016

Today is Valentine's Day. Today is the first Sunday in Lent, 2016. Though they may seem to be disparate entities, a similarity of these two events occurs in a determined response to love offered. (Make heart shape with hands.) We determine to accept and reciprocate; or we determine to reject and ignore.

There are many kinds of love letters, but some of the most seminal are those delivered to us by our inheritance. The Deuteronomist offers instruction on how to respond to God's offer of love and grace through our heritage. From Deuteronomy 26: (read)

In Deuteronomy's explanation of a liturgical ceremony of the bringing of the first fruits of the harvest, we find ancient creeds and affirmations; ways to respond individually and corporately to the abundance of God's good gifts to us. It was a service which was to be repeated on a regular basis; for, as the best of educators realize, it is in repetition that an idea sinks into our consciousness and becomes embedded there, becomes a part of who we are. Walter Brueggemann, in *The Creative Word*, says that instruction in accepted faith values "believes that the normative articulations of faith lie outside the human psyche, exist before us, wait for us, and are given to us as a gift. Children need not invent world-forming secrets; but they are invited to share in a secret already trusted and relied upon."

Lent is a time for self-examination. A good way to do that is to remember from whom we came. In addition to family, that can mean mentors, good friends, anyone who has influenced whom we are becoming.

When you bring your offering, say, "A wandering Aramean was my father..."

When I think about who I am, I may say, "A singing farm wife was my grandmother." Through the heavy-duty work of the day and through the heavy-duty disappointments, emotional and physical pain, she would sing. Sometimes it would be a Scottish or Irish ballad. One in particular I remember was the ballad of Barbara Allen.

My second introduction to the song was in English lit class. I know that, I thought. But the words are a little different. One of the most popular of ballads which emigrated across the Atlantic Ocean carried in the mouths of people who would settle in the Appalachians, there are several versions of the anonymous poem. It tells the story of unrequited love. William loves Barbara to the point of death. A last-ditch effort leads only to further spurning by Barbara. Barbara walks into William's room, pulls aside the bed curtains, "You're dying," she taunts him. "I love you ..."

"Ha! You should have thought of that when you ignored me the other day!" and she swishes out of the room. On the return home, she hears the death bells tolling and is stricken to the heart. "Go dig my grave, daddy," she cries. "William died for me today; I'll die for him tomorrow."

Sing: Sweet William lay in his church grave; Barbara lay a nigh him. On William's grave there grew a red rose; on Barbara's grew a briar. They grew, they grew to the top of the church; they grew, they

grew still higher. They grew, they grew till they could grow no more, and the rose wrapped around the briar.”

Hymns like “Standing on the Promises” and “Love Lifted Me” would lift Grandma’s spirits as she went about her daily tasks.

Rising before the sun, she would hurry to the barn, milk the cows, and help bottle the milk which would be delivered before breakfast to the houses in a near-by little village. Back to the house to cook breakfast for up to 12 or 14 people depending on which of the 14 children had been born, who had gone away to school, or who had married. Depending on the time of year, she might go to the garden to pick beans and prepare them for eating or for canning; or to the strawberry patch.

One day she picked enough strawberries to make 10 pies, enough for each child at home to have one of his own. Mixed the dough, rolled out the crusts, filled them and crimped the edges. She thought they would have a pie to savor for the rest of the day! She was wrong. Those growing boys had their pie eaten in less time than it took her to make one.

Then there was cotton to pick, clothes to wash (in a big black pot outside), and the cows would be returning from the pasture near sundown to be milked again.

And more. Dishes to be washed. Scared children to be lulled to sleep at night; sick children to be held; injured children to be doctored. One day Uncle Dietz was cutting down corn stalks with a sickle and came right back at his ankle. With no doctor near enough, Grandma sewed up the deep cut with needle and thread out of her sewing box.

From her I learned to sing when there is nothing to sing about!

“Remember the past,” urges the author of today’s scripture passage. We are shaped by the past and our future depends on our knowing it. Recalling the past reminds us of God’s provision. When we apprehend past provision, we more fully trust to future provision. Recalling reminds us of the community, of the relationships which formed us.

Sardis Baptist Church is more than our gathering for Sunday morning worship. It’s also when we gather to take snacks to the police station, when we gather to sing to friends whose mobility is limited, when we provide shelter, good food and good community for our homeless neighbors, when we stand with each other sharing life’s joys and life’s tragedies.

Since our heritage made us who we are, remembering it is important. Today people do not sit around the table and share stories as often as they did in the past. Maybe we need to acquire a Twitter account. Hash tag: Sardis story. Send out those little short bursts of history on the information highway.

A “burning bush” experience precipitated a small exodus from Carmel when that church decided to relocate to a highway 51 location. Excitement and joy permeated those early members as they planned and carried out the decision to form a democratic, member-led congregation. When they moved their meeting place from the Carmel facility to Providence Day School, like those Israelite desert wanderers, they had to pick up and carry their worship center with them. Guy and Mary Ann

Kelly set up and took down baby furniture each Sunday. The biscuit run crew (Todd Cook, Jim Owen, Larry Harrill among them) set up and dismantled “pews” and “pulpit.” They were the “biscuit run” because when everything was set up, they would run to Hardee’s and enjoy biscuits for their breakfast.

The wisdom and loving spirit of church planter Dewey Hobbs guided the group into making a church, at first called Carmel Oaks and then Sardis.

The unexpected, unfortunate resignation of our first called pastor resulted in a wilderness experience. About half the congregation couldn’t find the motivation to “start over.” Those who remained called Doug Aldritch as interim pastor, and he led them through that daunting sea to firm ground on the other side.

Numerous times when the congregation has thirsted for monetary resources, a rock was struck and God’s gifts flowed out freely. Those early, few members paid off a \$350,000 loan in three years. In the last 12 years, we have paid off two mortgages, one for each of the buildings.

Mike Jones and Lewis Sykes led us in securing the Miller Property, now we’re closer to that promised land of development into a green space for church and community.

Mary Holbrook gave us a tradition of administrator’s assistant difficult to live up to until God’s good gift of Kathryn. Mary didn’t know much about a computer, but she knew all those things that helped us most.

Some of the early fund raising efforts resulted in furthering fellowship among the members and introducing ourselves to the surrounding community. Dan Warren brought his barbeque cooker and spent the night turning Boston butts with the help of several church members. Not everyone stayed the night; but several showed up to help during the time that Page Odom was serving his jambalaya.

Oh...I could tweet all day and barely scratch the surface. But I would be losing all my followers! We sometimes need to take small bites of history in order to digest it properly.

Interwoven throughout the Deuteronomic explanation of the collection of offerings, is the exhortation to say “Thank you!” Not just a verbal expression of thanks, but a cultivation of feeling, of living, gratitude.

Moses reminds the people, “You don’t have what you have from your own doing. All that you have is a gift from God.” It’s true; Canaan was not handed to the Israelites on a silver platter; they had to exert some energy to possess the land. It was God who heard their cries of despair, God who provided a means of escape, God who guarded them through the wilderness, God who brought them to the edge of new opportunity.

Salvation has to do with new opportunity. The Hebrew word for salvation means “to make wide.” There is width enough to escape from that which enslaves us, from that which limits us.

God’s story of salvation did not finish with the story of BCE Israelites. Through Jesus Christ, God has given us a wideness, an opportunity to enter a land flowing with milk and honey, to experience abundance beyond imagination. In spite of our grumbling, our rebellion, our fears and doubt.

Country music singer Toby Keith wrote a song called *If I Was Jesus*. A couple of the lines go something like this: "If I was Jesus...I'd know your dark little secrets, I'd look you right in the face and I'd tell you I love you, with amazing grace...I'd forgive you and adore you...if I was Jesus."

The red rose of God's forgiveness and love continually reaches to wrap around the briars which spring up in the soil of our lives.

May we remember our past with thanksgiving, live our present with thanksgiving, move forward into the future with thanksgiving. Answer God's love letters to us by thanksgiving. As John Greenleaf Whittier says in *My Triumph*:

Parcel and part of all,
I keep the festival,
Fore-reach the good to be,
And share the victory.

I feel the earth move sunward,
I join the great march onward,
And take by faith, while living,
My freehold of thanksgiving.

We, too, can own it!