

“Love’s Prayer”

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February 16, 2014

1 Corinthians 3: 1-9

Every year Valentine's Day gets a bad rap. I know the arguments—that it is a commercialized, Hallmark-driven way to get us to spend our money and feel guilty if we don't have the perfect relationship with the perfect man or woman. And it can be that, I supposed, but I also think Valentine's Day can be a great excuse to reflect on the love we have in our lives and the love we see in the world. I think there is so many opportunities to read and hear about the bad things in the world like war and economic decline and snow that it is okay, and even preferable, to set aside at least one day a year to think about how we can care for each other and to be sweet, loving and downright nice. And, if that day happens to fall on a Friday, why not stretch it across the weekend? Maybe part of the reason people get so cynical about Valentine's Day is because we only tell one kind of love story, the old fashioned boy meets girl kind. That's a good one, but today I have some different love stories for you. They are not your traditional valentine's day stories, but they are my valentine's to you.

My first story is about how choosing love means choosing compassion. If I mention prison, compassion is probably not the first word that comes to mind, but this love story takes place in the Iowa State Penitentiary. There, they have implemented a hospice care program for prisoners who are aging and in their final stage of life. The end of life can be scary in the best of circumstances, but especially so when you are in prison and far away from family and friends and everyday comforts. There is little written into our prison systems that allow for additional comforts or relaxed circumstances when you are serving time, even in someone's last days. But in Iowa, there is a group of men who have volunteered to make those days more comfortable. They have transformed infirmary cells so that it is more comfortable and welcoming, and they take turns caring for the hospice inmates.

Most often, they just sit with them, providing them company so that they know that no matter what happens, they aren't alone.

It's an act of love to sit with someone, uncertain if your presence is making a difference, but knowing it is where you need to be, and knowing that if it was you, you would want someone by your side, makes all the difference. What I am most touched by in this story, is that the volunteers who spend their time helping inmates and caring for others are also inmates. They were trained by volunteer hospice workers but then the care is left to them. This is not their prison job and they are not paid—this is a prison hospice program run almost entirely by inmates willing to give their time to help someone else. Bank robbers caring for kidnappers. Thieves looking after murderers. I'm touched by this program, and by the inmates who have not let prison define them.

They are now being defined by kindness and generosity of spirit. The journey to the end of life is something that many of us struggle to do well, or struggle to do with our loved ones, but this group of men is doing it beautifully with each other, in a very unlikely place. They are performing a service of compassion and of love to their fellow prisoners—they have written a new kind of love story out there in Iowa where not many people are paying attention. This story captured the heart of a documentary filmmaker, and it has become one of the documentary shorts nominated for an Academy Award this year. Keep your eyes open for it if you want to hear more about this love story.

The next love story that has been on my mind recently are the acts of love that have been taking place in Sochi over the course of the Olympics. My favorite part of the Olympics is not the competition, but is the way we, the whole world, are in it together. People with different nationalities and customs and religions and families and economic levels set aside their differences for two weeks every two years. Our athletes share a love of sport—they have a common understanding of the drive and hard work and sacrifice that it takes to get all the way to the Olympics. We hear about the Olympic spirit—and it is a spirit of camaraderie, support, and sportsmanship. It's the opposite of what you might imagine if you get all of the best athletes in the world in the same place and have them compete against

one another. Instead of jeering the losers or cheating to get Gold, our Olympians take the opposite approach. They give each other respect and support and even do things that look a lot like love.

Two examples have stood out to me in the last week. The first happened during a cross country ski race when Russian skier Anton Gafarov broke one of his skis. He attempted to continue on the course, but fell, his ski completely falling apart. From the sidelines, the Canadian coach came to Gafarov's rescue with a new ski. He knelt down beside him, took off his ski binding, and replaced it with the new one. Gafarov wouldn't medal, but the Canadian coach allowed him to finish with dignity, recognizing that was more important than the fact that they were representing opposing teams.

The second example comes from another cross country skiing event with Roberto Carcelen, who in the last winter Olympics was Peru's first ever competitor. He was back this year, to race once more. He suffered a broken rib during training, but persevered. In his event, because of his injury, he was dead last. He was so far last that he was the only athlete left on the ski course for the last ten minutes. He looked like he was in pain, but he continued on. When he neared the end, he skied towards the spectators and received a Peruvian flag. He crossed the finish line, proudly, waving his country's flag. Even better, when he crossed, there were two fellow athletes waiting for him. The second to last skier from Nepal who had finished ten minutes before, and the winner of the race, from Switzerland, who had finished a half an hour before. They both embraced him, congratulating him on his completed race, making sure that he wasn't alone.

In both events, people reached across the lines of competition to show someone kindness. They were little acts of love, little love stories unfolding in the midst of a bigger Olympic story.

Finally, I have a story that is much closer to home. It is the story of our community. I've been the first responder for the last week since Dick has been out of the office. This means that I am most likely the one to receive calls from the hospital and from the funeral home. What you might not realize, is that I also receive phone calls and emails from church members checking in on one another. People call up or stop by during the week to say "How is Anne doing?" "Does he need anything?" "What do

we know about this family and how can we help?” It's one of the things I love most about this church—the way we reach out and touch base and inquire about one another when we hear something is going on or when we hear someone has passed away.

You have no way of knowing, unless you answer the phones at South Church, how much you all care about each other. You are quick to lift up prayers and even quicker to respond to one another when we are grieving or hurting or needing support. The love stories that get made into movies are ones that have grand gestures and a hero and some sort of plot twist or dramatic tension. But the real love stories are the ones we live every day, in the small acts and the intentional ways we show that we care about each other. And we are doing a good job of that here.

I believe in a God who believes in love. I believe in a God who told us that if we're only going to do one thing, let that thing be to love one another, love God, and love ourselves. Love is the only commandment. The last line in today's passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians reminds us that we are God's servants, working together. We are God's field, God's building. When I look around, whether it is Valentine's Day or a regular day, I see people around me planting seeds of love in one another, in God's field, helping each other grow into the loving beings God intends us to be. There are no limits to the definition and demonstration of love. Love is about nurturing, it is compassion, it is kindness, generosity, and companionship. Love is an invitation to reach out to one another, and to walk beside each other through the good times and the hard times. My hope for you today is that you can wrench yourself away from the limitations and the cynicism that we hear about love, and seek it out in every person you meet and know. Let your life be defined by love, and seek out the love stories that are unfolding around you. Amen.