

Transfiguration Sunday – February 14, 2021
2 Kings 2:1-12, Ps 50:1-6, Mark 9:2-9

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.

That may be straight from Dickens, but I'm not thinking of *The Tale of Two Cities*. I'm talking about Valentine's Day – a day perhaps riddled with rejection as much as romance, and dejection as much as delight.

It is not easy being on the sidelines on a day that celebrates romantic pairings – especially if the absence of a partner in your life is a tender spot for you. And this feeling of being left out (which we have all experienced at one time or another) rears its head long before we hit our romantic years, of course – just ask the child standing by himself at the edge of the playground, trying to pretend he's absorbed in something he sees in the distance when all he longs for is being asked to play.

Most elementary school classrooms have Valentine's Day protocols that try to be sensitive to this reality; so if you give a card to one friend, you have to give one to all your classmates. But it wasn't always thus. My old friend Martha used to talk about growing up in Langley in the 1930s, when there were no such expectations and it was sink or swim.

In fact, in her school classroom, the child who was given the most Valentine cards would be awarded a special one from the teacher! I couldn't understand why my dear friend didn't agree with me that this was a pretty horrible tradition, until I found out that she was the one who usually won the prize! She confessed that she

hadn't really thought about what it must have been like to come in last in that particular competition.

It was for similar reasons that I wasn't allowed to use the term "best friend" when I was growing up. Mom, quite rightly I think, steered me away from any language that divided friends up into "better than" or "less than." We all know the drama and heartache that can come from ranking people, or being ranked – of deciding who is in the "in group" and who is not. Placing people in categories is a common pastime for us humans, and it's a habit that can be hard to break.

So – likely much to my husband's dismay, and he can blame his mother-in-law for this – I have tended to see Valentine's Day as a chance to celebrate friendship and affection in all its inclusive variety; I would rather hand out chocolates on the bus than be the recipient of lovingly offered but overpriced roses.

Now, I have visions of André watching from home right now and getting twitchy because I am preaching on Valentine's Day instead of Transfiguration Sunday. But in my Valentine's Day-flavoured reading of today's scripture passages, what stands out for me is not the ascension of Elijah or the transfiguration of Jesus, but the friends who were beside them at the time.

In our reading from the second book of Kings, Elisha was cautioned to stay put and let Elijah walk on alone. He was warned off three times, in fact, not just by the company of prophets but by Elijah himself. But each time, Elisha replies "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." Elisha knows that he is walking Elijah right to the end of his earthly life, into whatever heavenly state God has

planned for him. I imagine it must have been a frightening journey for Elijah – but thanks to Elisha, it wasn't a lonely one. The scriptures say that they “walked and talked” right until the moment they were separated by the chariots of fire and Elijah ascends into glory.

Elisha probably felt a little inadequate along the way – he was perhaps scrambling desperately to find just the right words of farewell – but he knew his job was to be there regardless. And Elijah affirms the value of Elisha's presence; he says witnessing his ascension will allow Elisha to inherit a double portion of his spirit. Elisha doesn't have to say or do the “right” thing; it is his commitment to being present that will empower him.

And we know that the disciples definitely didn't know what to do when Jesus became a dazzling, transfigured presence, alongside Moses and Elijah. Mark's gospel tells us that Peter, James and John “did not know what to say, for they were terrified.” I am sure that all of us have felt exactly the same way at times when we are accompanying someone through great heartbreak, or transfiguring change, or loss. But Jesus knows his disciples by now. He knows they are often tongued-tied or wrong-footed in their understanding. We don't know exactly why he chose those three disciples to journey up the mountain with him that day, but I think we can be absolutely certain it wasn't because he was expecting them to say something brilliant at just the right time.

We don't reach out to friends for perfectly phrased words. Just by their presence alone friends pave rough paths with the balm of attentiveness and caring, and they enhance joyous moments by pooling their happiness with ours. Friends carry within

them each others' stories; they give witness to what we are and they imagine, often before we can, all that we can be.

Today's passages are just two in the scriptures that give us a glimpse of the holy ground on which friends meet. We can think, too, of Ruth and Naomi, or David and Jonathan. Such relationships highlight that wonderful aspect of love that C.S. Lewis called *Philia* – or friendship – in his book, *The Four Loves*.

The four loves he talks about, using Greek terminology, are *storge*, being the bonds of natural affection between family members, *eros*, or romantic love, *agape*, the selfless and often difficult-to-achieve love referenced in Jesus's command to love neighbour and enemy alike, and *philia*, being a friendship based on a deep mutuality of feeling and interest, a friendship that goes beyond surface pleasures and pastimes into a shared space in which you can be genuinely yourself at your best and your worst.

Lewis makes a point of singling out *philia* as more elevated than *storge* or *eros* because it is not strictly necessary for our survival; it is a companionship not dictated by biology. He wrote that "to the Ancients, Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue" and he went on to say, "The modern world, in comparison, ignores it."

He was writing in 1960, and I dare say we are just as bad now at neglecting this "crown of life," as he puts it. *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, published 40 years later in the year 2000, tells us that writers of the ancient world such as Aristotle, Cicero and Plato viewed friendship as a significant moral influence; in the

sixth century Pope Gregory defined a friend as a *custos animae*, the guardian of one's soul.

But along the line some Christians began to see strong friendships as a hindrance to that selfless *agape* love we are meant to aspire to. Just like those well-intentioned teachers and parents who firmly discourage giving Valentine's cards to an exclusive one or two or three friends, these theologians thought we should strive to be more universal and unprejudiced in our affections.

But we are not universally created; we are each uniquely made, and it would be a hard thing indeed to turn away from the great gift of having special friends whose thoughts and feelings complement and challenge our own particularly well. The *Oxford Companion* goes on to say:

There is now emerging consensus among philosophers and theologians that, whatever the challenges to universal demands of love and justice, friendship remains morally and theologically significant. What is needed are ways to narrate the tensions between the universality of love and the particularity of friendship such that the demands of each are honoured.

So how might we, as Christians, foster opportunities for friendships that can shape souls for the better? At St. Clement's we pride ourselves on our (hopefully soon-to-return) tradition of marvellous social gatherings. I know I am not the only one missing them. But as a church and as individuals, can we do a better job of creating even deeper friendships, the kind to which we can bring utterly unguarded hearts?

When we begin to emerge from the restrictions necessitated by the pandemic, that's a conversation I would love to have.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." That's a pretty big ask. So let's start smaller than that. Instead of laying down our life, we can lay down our book and telephone someone. We can lay down our endless to-do list and Zoom an old friend, or a new one. Perhaps we need to lay down some unresolved grudges or the shyness that stops us from speaking from the heart. Building friendships that matter takes Elisha's persistence and courage, as well as the willingness of the disciples who climbed that mountain alongside Jesus. But what could be a better reward for one's time and effort than having friends who act as *custos animae*; guardians of one's soul.

So however we celebrate this Transfiguration Valentine's Day, may it inspire in us gratitude for the friends who lighten our burdens, double our laughter, and stand with us even – or especially – when they don't know what to say. And may it remind us as well to keep an eye out for that child or adult at the edge of the metaphorical playground, longing to be included in the joy of companionship. It is sometimes said optimistically that "strangers are just friends we haven't met yet," and I think many times that is true. May all of us enjoy the blessing of affections that are animated by the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

- *The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen*