

"Love"

Rev. Jeff Bacon

December 19, 2021

Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, lead us in the Way of Jesus who you sent as a baby that we might know your love for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

This is the Sunday of Love: the much talked about and sung about, the often experienced and yet not very well understood, Love. I'd like to begin with an incredible love story. In many ways, Tony Toto and his wife Frances were a typical married couple. Tony was 44, Frances was 45; they lived in a red brick house in Allentown, Pennsylvania; they were high school sweethearts from the Bronx, married for 24 years with four children and two grandchildren; they owned and operated a pizza restaurant; and like all couples, they had some good times and some not-so-good times. What's less typical is that Tony was being unfaithful, and his wife, Frances tried to kill him seven times.

A wire was tied across the front steps to their house so that Tony would trip, fall down the stairs and kill himself, but he saw the wire. A man was hired with a .38 caliber hand gun, but he never got a clear shot at Tony. A friend of one of their sons waited in the bushes to hit Tony over the head with a baseball bat, but the bat got caught up in the bushes. A hired man ran a wire from the distributor of Tony's car to the gas tank to blow up his car when he started it, but it didn't work. Their daughter's new boyfriend shot Tony in the head, but the .25 caliber bullet lodged in his skull. Two days later, two friends of the boyfriend shot Tony in the chest, missing his heart by an inch. Frances then fed her ailing husband some chicken soup laced with barbiturates to finish him off, but Tony recovered at the hospital.

Frances pleaded guilty to attempted murder and spent four years in prison. Tony tried to get the charges dropped, but the state didn't agree. Tony stopped being unfaithful and forgave Frances. Frances realized she went too far and forgave Tony. When Frances got out of prison, they returned to their married life

in their red brick house. With his arm around Frances, Tony said, "I don't understand it, why people break up over silly things."

God loves us unconditionally, forgives our sin and opens for us a life filled with our own incredible love stories. "For nothing will be impossible with God." When the angel Gabriel visited with the unwed Virgin Mary to tell her that she would conceive a son to be called "Son of God," and that her elderly, barren relative Elizabeth would also bear a son, the angel Gabriel explained, "For nothing will be impossible with God." Two poor, marginalized women: one young, unwed and pregnant; the other far beyond the age to have children. Two pregnant women laughing and singing as they celebrate God's claim on their lives; experiencing joy fueled by expectancy, mystery, and love.

Like Elizabeth and Mary, have you ever asked, "Why is this happening to me?" Maybe it's God making a claim on your life, "for nothing will be impossible with God."

Mary responds to Elizabeth with a song of praise. The world is to be changed, not through the rebellion of the weak against the powerful, but through the coming of God in the weakness of a child, revealing God's love in tenderness and promise. God removes the isolation felt by both Elizabeth and Mary and helps them to understand themselves more fully as a part of a love story much larger than themselves. Their hope and understanding grows, bringing them peace in their difficult human circumstances, causing them to erupt in joyful exuberance as God's love for them is revealed in the midst of their waiting. It's a wonderful love story.

I'd like to share with you another love story about what happened to Ted Forbes in 1984. While walking down a street in Chicago, Ted found a wallet. Being an honest Christian man, he wanted to return it to its owner. So, he opened it to look for identification. The wallet contained just \$3.00; no driver's license; no Social Security card; no pictures; nothing to indicate who owned the wallet. But, in the wallet, Ted found an old envelope. It was wrinkled and looked as if it had been carried there for years. The only part of the writing on the envelope that could be read was the return address.

To find more information, Ted opened the envelope, and to his surprise, the letter was dated June 6, 1924. The letter had been written nearly 60 years ago. It was a "Dear John" letter written to a man named Michael, from a woman named Hannah. Hannah explained that though she loved him, and she would always love him, her parents had forbidden her to see him anymore.

Ted Forbes wanted to locate the owner of the lost wallet. He drove to the location listed on the return address, parked the car and walked up to the door. A woman answered the door. Ted asked the woman if she knew a Michael or a Hannah. She told him that 30 years ago she had purchased the house from a family whose daughter was named Hannah. She said that Hannah had placed her mother in a nursing home just a few blocks down the street.

Ted drove down to the nursing home. He explained the story to the Nursing Supervisor, who told Ted that the lady he was trying to find had died. However, Ted was given a telephone number where he might locate Hannah. Calling that number, Ted learned that Hannah was not living there anymore. The person answering the phone said Hannah was now in an apartment building for the elderly.

Ted began to wonder why he was making such a big deal out of an old, lost wallet which contained only \$3.00 and a crumpled up old letter. But he decided to keep looking.

Ted finally tracked down Hannah and went to visit her at her 3rd floor apartment. Ted knocked on the door and a gray-haired, bright-eyed lady with a warm smile answered the door. It was Hannah Marshall.

Ted told Hannah about finding the wallet and, showing her the letter, asked if she knew someone named Michael. Hannah took the letter. Tears filled her eyes. She told Ted that the letter was the last contact she had with Michael. She said that she had never married because she never met anyone she loved as much as Michael. Then she asked Ted, if he found Michael, would he tell him she still loved him and that she thought about him every day.

Ted thanked Hannah and left. As Ted was walking down the apartment hallway, he was carrying the wallet in his hand. The janitor saw the wallet,

stopped Ted in the hallway and asked, "May I see that wallet?" Ted handed it to him. "Why, that's Mr. Goldstein's wallet. I'd know it anywhere. He's always losing it." Ted asked where he could find Mr. Goldstein and the janitor said he lived in Apartment 6 on the 8th floor. So, Ted quickly made his way to the 8th floor and knocked on the door of Apartment 6. Sure enough, an old man named Michael answered the door. Ted showed the wallet to the old man and asked if it was his. Yes, it was.

Ted admitted reading the letter to seek identification of the owner. Mr. Goldstein hesitated, "You read it?" Then he told Ted that his life nearly ended many years ago when he lost Hannah. He had never married and had never stopped loving her. Then Ted said, "Mr. Goldstein, I think I know where Hannah is." The old man became very excited. Ted simply took him by the hand, led him to the elevator and down to the third floor to Hannah Marshall's apartment door.

When Hannah opened the door, they looked at each other in disbelief. Michael walked slowly to Hannah, he took her in his arms, and their 60-year separation evaporated in the warmth of their love.

About three weeks after Michael and Hannah were reunited, Ted got a call asking him to be their best man. They were to be married after many long years of waiting. It's a wonderfully miraculous love story.

The wonderfully miraculous love story of the New Testament was first celebrated by two pregnant women, laughing and singing during the long wait for the birth of their sons. The first son was born to be a messenger; and the latter son was born in a stable, because there was no room for them at the inn. The first son prepared the way for the Son of God. The latter son was the Son of God, bearing God's message of love for all humankind. It's a wonderfully miraculous love story that's still unfolding. Thanks be to God. Amen.