



FAITH matters

February 13, 2023

Who's Your Valentine?

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)

Remember decorating those early-elementary-school Valentine boxes? Remember selecting the appropriate Valentine for each classmate? (You didn't assign them randomly, did you?) Did you also trade those “conversation heart” candies, carefully matching the message and the recipient? As I recall, I sent Valentines to everyone (as perhaps I was required to do), but I certainly chose messages according to my level of esteem for each classmate. I also chose according to the level of embarrassment I might feel if the messages became public. It wouldn't do to send “Be mine” or “Kiss Me” or “Cutie Pie” to the wrong children! Did I consider who might feel excluded or dishonored or insulted? I doubt it. Some children are thoughtful and selfless, but I was apparently not one of them.

When I was ten, I faced a more serious question when my father asked me if I wished I could trade places with my little brother. My brother was five years old and had been diagnosed with muscular dystrophy when he was two. He was lying on the couch and about to go into the hospital for one of the last times. My father and I were standing beside him, and my father asked something like, “Do you wish you could be sick instead of him?” Having some acquaintance with the symptoms of muscular dystrophy, I said definitively, “NO!”

Maybe my father didn't mean to ask that question, or maybe he was essentially asking if I loved my brother and wished I could share his suffering. Quite likely, he was projecting his own feeling, since I'm sure he wished he could suffer instead of his child. At ten, though, I had the sense that I had delivered the wrong answer and the sense that my father had thought better of me.

Now that I'm undeniably mature, I'm well aware that I am not the center of the universe. I understand that the world exists apart from my perceptions of it, and that it will continue with or without me. I know some of the right things to say, and I realize that people respond more favorably to genuine interest than they do to extended monologues. The interest and curiosity *are* genuine; I'm not merely

calculating the likely results. Maybe I would be more willing to share someone else's suffering. Out of a combination of habit and empathy, perhaps, I do some of the right things.

But when I consider the suffering and love of Christ, I know I'm not yet altogether mature as a Christian. I am grateful for the many examples of selfless love, generosity, and kindness in this church community, and yet I suspect that at least a few of us could do more. It's easy to deplore the commercialism of a holiday such as Valentine's Day, but we need not pass up a chance to send a Valentine to someone who's sick or alone, someone who might not otherwise be remembered, someone estranged from family and friends. Would a sincere compliment make someone's day? Could a larger donation alleviate someone's suffering? Would someone appreciate a meal? Is there a neighbor or a child who simply needs a good listener? Could we contribute more of our valuable time toward an organization in whose mission we believe? Could we encourage someone else to volunteer as well? Might not such activity be more fulfilling than pursuing our own ends?

As Rev. Anne said in her February 5 sermon, if we ask for God's direction about how to contribute the talents He has given us, we will surely find our opportunities!

~Written by Maurine Slaughter



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