

True Love

Luke 9.28-45

The Vatican is four centuries into a battle to regain control of the Holy Cenacle, supposed site of the Last Supper. The crusaders conquered it and the Franciscans curated it until 1551, when the Ottoman's took over and built a mosque there. Israel owns it now and reveres it as the sight of King David's tomb.

Meanwhile, First Baptist Church of Brattleboro, Vermont, decided to hock a century-old stained glass window depicting the apostle John so they could keep their homeless shelter open. Pastor Suzanne Lee Andrews admits to some regrets but explains that the Tiffany window "is just a material thing."

Questions of sacred space, beautiful objects, and the real meaning of love intersect on February 14 when Transfiguration Sunday and Valentine's Day coincide.

Peter offers to slap up a trio of lean-to's and keep the Feast of Booths right on the spot. His motion fails, but we should see it as an act of radical love. Such a plan would give Jerusalem (the prescribed precincts for such a celebration) a miss. Peter's building campaign then becomes a stunning statement of faith! If this rocky outcrop hosts Moses, Elijah and Jesus, it beats other holy ground all hollow, even the revered Temple.

But the Father has another agenda: This is indeed my "chosen" (or, in the parallel texts, "beloved") Son. Want to honor him? Then listen. Next, Jesus leads them down the slopes and launches a pilgrimage to the very town Peter seeks to by-pass. When he arrives there, Jesus will hang a condemned sign on the Temple and die outside the city limits. Holy turf, Peter learns, is wherever Jesus is. And the problem with a living Lord is that, unlike real estate or stained glass, he won't stay put. The only way to remain faithful is to remain mobile. Obedience beats consistency when it comes to serving Jesus.

Ask any woman and she'll probably tell you that cards, flowers, candy – even jewelry – rank a poor second to the simple gift of paying attention. Diamonds are forever, but that's just the point: do you still love me when crystalline beauty crumbles? Do you idolatrously enshrine who I was, or adventurously pursue who I am becoming? "To the noble mind" Shakespeare's Ophelia chides her flaky boyfriend Hamlet, "rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind."

How do Christians show our devotion to Jesus? By gaining control of the spot where he washed his disciples' feet – or by washing the feet of those who control the spot? How do believers honor the Beloved Disciple? By encasing him in leaded glass – or by selling the glass to serve his Lord in the person of the poor?

Evagrius, one of the Desert Fathers, told the story of a monk whose only possession was a copy of the Gospels, which he e-bay'ed to feed the hungry. The old lunatic used to joke, "I have even sold the word which commands me to sell all and give to the poor."

Seek Jesus today, listen to him, and move with him. With your Lord as with your beloved, the best present is simply to be present. (But if you're smart, you'd probably better spring for chocolate and some roses; no point being a fanatic.)

With Love,

Doug