

# “The Heart of the Matter”

Scripture-- James 1:2-4 (New Living Translation)

Have you ever thought about how crummy the timing of Valentine's Day is? Do you not find it ironic that Valentine's Day is right smack dab in the middle of a time of year when many people are experiencing seasonal depression anyway? Even the Energizer Bunny feels a little blue at this time of year.

So, we have this concocted holiday hitting us right at the time many of us are about a month into our South Beach Diets...great, invent a holiday that celebrates chocolate. Moreover, many folks are looking for a significant relationship...great, let's celebrate a holiday about lovey dovey relationships at a time when people are feeling blue anyway.

Nancy Lafferty told me that it is inappropriate for me to use the word hate in a sermon, so let me choose another one...loathe. I loathe Valentine's Day...really loathe it. So much so that I have come up with a solution. My solution is based on research that says that the winter blues usually subsides sometime during the spring and summer months. How about moving Valentine's Day to the summer? I'd vote for canceling it all together, but I was told by sources very, very close to me that eliminating Valentine's Day all together was not an option, but summer...summer seems like a nice compromise doesn't it?

And by the way, this little tirade serves as your friendly reminder that Valentine's Day is this coming Tuesday. Surely you hadn't forgotten? Entertainer Mario Rocco said **Memory is what tells a man that his wife's birthday was yesterday.** Well, in this case it's Valentine's Day, so don't say I didn't warn you.

I have to tell you, it has only been since I was 10 years old that I have loathed Valentine's Day. I think little kids have the right idea about celebrating Valentine's Day and I think we adults can learn a lot from them. Don't you remember the pure, unmitigated joy of giving and receiving a Valentine from every kid in the class? I remember as if it were yesterday searching for perfect box of Valentines cards at Super-X drugstore...what would they be...Scooby Doo, Garfield, Bugs Bunny? I gave a card to every kid in the class—every kid except for Bobby Fike who tried to staple my finger to the desk. Bobby Fike notwithstanding, the point here is that when you are a kid, Valentine's Day is a celebration of relationships pure and simple, no strings attached.

It is we adults who have fouled the detail with Valentine's Day. Instead of recognizing and appreciating the relationships all around us that sustain us day in and day out, we let this one day shape our view of relationships as this

idyllic, illusory love that can be measured in chocolate, flowers and cards.

To that end, there has been a relationship I have been thinking about a lot lately. A relationship that is built on simplicity and has no strings attached. This morning I'd like to share a little bit about the relationship I have with my brother John. Because of some things that have been going on in John's life, we have had the opportunity to connect deeply as brothers and as friends.

Growing up I always admired my brother and wanted to be just like him. He is ten years older than I am, so when I was 8, he was 18...man was he cool. One of the strongest memories I have of my brother is from my days in little league baseball when I was 8. I was terrible...I struck out every time up at bat. Well, my brother had come home for the summer from his freshman year at college and came to the ballpark to see one of my paltry attempts at the plate...strike one, strike two, strike three...yer out! I was really devastated, embarrassed and humiliated to have done that in front of my brother. I'd really wanted to impress him.

The next day my brother asked if I'd like to go out in the driveway and work on some hitting? We did just that...he helped me with my stance, how to hold the bat, how to see the ball as it came out of the pitcher's hand. Once we got the mechanics worked out he must have thrown me a thousand pitches.

The next night I had another game. Besides my own ineptness, our whole team quite resembled the Bad News Bears. We hadn't won but about two games the whole season. Our biggest victory was getting somebody to get us a hotdog in the dugout. However, that night Walt Disney himself could not have written a better script. After a scoreless first inning, I got my first chance to bat in the second inning. I came to the plate thinking, bend your knees...shoulder's width apart...hands firm but not too tight...right elbow in...watch for the seams...watch for the seams of the ball. Well, the pitcher wound up with his first pitch, and for a moment, time slowed. The ball looked as big as a grapefruit as it tumbled languidly toward the plate. I started my motion...body twisting, uncorking, hands around...SMACK!

I kid you not, I hit the first pitch so hard it sailed over the left-center field fence and across the fence on the next field over. I hit a homerun; a towering homerun! I got to first base a little misty eyed...second base a little leaky-eyed...third base a lot leaky-eyed...and then as I trotted to home plate, there was my brother standing in the bleachers with his arms folded with one corner of his mouth turned up in an approving smile.

I tell you that story this morning just to share with you the kind of guy my brother was then, and is now. He has always been there for me...always with his arms folded with one

corner of his mouth turned up in an approving smile. When I was in college, I could always count on a meal at his home on Sunday nights. When I got married, my brother stood up with me. My kids now know my brother as Crazy Uncle John. Last summer, my brother and I spent 10 days together in Guatemala working and filming. Suffice to say, my brother and I have kept in touch over the years.

Recently though our relationship has changed. Recently, my brother has been going through some difficult times in his life that have brought the two of us together in a much different way. Last August I received a phone call from my brother in which I heard something in his voice I'd never heard before, ever. There was a certain softness, an odd, barely perceivable vulnerability.

This was really strange to me because I'd never known my brother to show any emotion. I'd never known him to show any vulnerability or weakness. However, in the course of the conversation, I began to understand the real depth of his pain and confusion. Everything he'd known to be normal was being challenged and turned upside down.

After sleeping on our conversation, I called my brother the next day and invited him to come out and visit for the weekend, which he did. That weekend, we talked about everything from pasta to presidents to the very real pain he felt in his life. Moreover though, I felt myself doing something I rarely do—I began to let my guard down and let myself be vulnerable. I found myself sharing things with my brother that I hadn't shared with anyone.

I thought to myself how odd, out of all of this chaos, confusion and pain, our relationship was growing exponentially. It's kind of like one of those timed trick photography deals where you can see a plant grow from seed to plant right before your eyes. Because my brother had chosen to work out his pain and confusion with me, it gave me permission to reciprocate, and it gave us the opportunity to grow through it together. And, I really think that is what our Bible passage today is saying,

In James 1:2-4 it says, *Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.*

I think my brother would be quick to point out there has been very little joy at ground zero. But I also think he'd be just as quick to say because of the way we've come together this last several months, he has found a way to endure, grow and be ready for anything.

For me the X factor in this whole thing is, or what is really at the heart of the matter, is exactly how *did* this happen. How did two sons of the most stoic man on the planet find a way

to connect in such a substantial way? As I look back over our life, it occurs to me that at one time or another we each tended our relationship much like one would tend a campfire. Sometimes one of us has put the tender kindling on to get the fire started. At other times, one of us has put a log on the fire that has caused it to burn brightly. However, the one thing of which I am completely confident is that God has always been part of this relationship. God has always been there to gently blow on the glowing embers to keep them burning and active.

The thing is, I suppose, is that we've always had a pure and simple relationship with no strings attached—a relationship built on an unspoken trust and confidence—a relationship with no false expectation from the other. Because of the way our relationship has been nurtured, when crisis happened we were both available for each other with God square in the middle of it.

I know what you are probably thinking...you are probably thinking but yeah, you two are brothers. And I say exactly, we *are* brothers. We live in a society that tells us that men especially aren't supposed to relate to each other this way, which is why I'm all the more proud, impressed and thankful that my brother has opened the door for us to be able to relate this way.

This Valentines Day, I encourage you to think about *all* the relationships you have. Think about all of your relationships like kids handing out Valentines to everyone in the class. Think about the people who have always been there for you. Moreover, who are the people you have always been there for? What are you doing to nurture *those* life affirming relationships? To quote the old camp song, "It only takes a spark, to get a fire going." When we have been carefully tending the glowing embers at the ground of our relationships, we'll have a base upon which we can build a roaring fire.

#### CLOSING:

Poet and novelist Margaret Atwood said, *The Eskimos had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them: there ought to be as many for love.*

As we celebrate Valentine's Day this year, I hope and pray we find a name for all of the relationships in our lives that are important to us.

Have a great Sunday, go in peace.