

HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE LOVED? LISTEN

NO DOUBT ABOUT IT - YOU ARE LOVED!! We can't hear that enough, can we?? Especially with what we have been through in the last year. It was this time last year that we began to hear rumors of this novel virus in China which was beginning to threaten the United States. Not a single one of us could have imagined what we would endure this past year – the list of changes, interruptions, and challenges is long indeed. And yet, we thank God that our congregations and pastors have been resilient in the lifting up of God's Kingdom work throughout this pandemic. While we have faced upheaval and fears, we have heard through God's Word and Sacrament: **we are dearly loved**. What healing that provides for the soul to know that God's love isn't measured by our circumstances but settled once and for all at the Cross of Jesus.

As God's people, we are blessed to have the melding of Valentine's Day and the Transfiguration of our Lord. They go together like spaghetti and meatballs. (Would you prefer ham and cheese?) Could there be a better time to hear the voice of God proclaim His love than in the midst of what we have seen and experienced in the last year? What are you experiencing this very moment? Can you take a moment to listen to God: **YOU ARE LOVED!**

The story is told of a man who came to a city and delivered this clear and simple message every day in the marketplace: "Listen to God, not to the world." After a time his voice became a fixture in the city's life and people regarded him with amusement when they regarded him at all. Finally, a small boy, pitying the man, approached him and said, "Sir, why do you keep proclaiming the same word every day, year after year? The people here will never listen." "I stopped worrying about whether they would listen to me a long time ago," said the man. "I keep sharing the Word of God lest I begin to listen to them rather than God."

If Valentine's Day is all about the giving of love, (and it certainly is) then we as Christians should certainly celebrate the Creator of love, the Ultimate Giver of love who IS love – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God's love is the purest form of love - unconditional, everlasting, undying love - that comes to our lives through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are undeserving recipients of His perfect, life-changing love - love delivered to you personally - but also shared with you personally through His people. Jesus Himself performs a little "open heart" surgery on each of us. To God, our hearts are an open book. Nothing is hidden in the recesses of our heart. Jesus opens up our hearts to see what they are all about. Our relationship with God is very much a matter of the heart - not a romantic valentine, but the spiritual heart that makes you His or not His. By Christ's body and His Spirit, He gets our hearts pumping again. He creates in us clean hearts, resolved to love Him and our neighbors as He first loved us. David asked God for this "heart" blessing: "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me*" (Psalm 51:10). God cares about your heart and

transforming it (trans = change) to belong to Him. John the Baptist spoke of this ongoing transformation: *"He must increase, but I must decrease."* The Apostle Paul put it this way: *"I have been crucified with Christ. [Changed beginning at the heart.] It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God"* (Galatians 2:20).

The Evangelism resource, "Every One His Witness," instructs us in our witnessing and encouraging one another to recognize how we connect and communicate with the world around us. Similar to analyzing your love languages, we look to see if we connect to others through our head, heart or hands. There will be a huge focus on the heart this weekend. But as we celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord, we see that God focuses on the heart as well.

A young girl named Drew remembers her second grade Valentine's Day party. Several days before Valentine's Day, a big, decorated box had been placed at the front of the room by the teacher. It had a slit in the top. Each student had been invited to bring valentines addressed to friends and drop them into the box. Then on Valentine's Day, one student was designated by the teacher as the postman to distribute the cards. Earlier that week Drew's mother had bought a package of 35 valentine cards. Drew asked her, "Why did you buy so many?" She replied, "So you can give one to each person in your class." "No mom...", Drew said, "We don't do it that way. We only give cards to our special friends. **I only need four cards.** I don't even like some of the people in my class." Her mother said nothing else. Drew signed four cards and put the names on the front.

Everybody was excited when the Valentine's party began. The girl designated as postman began calling the names and handing out the cards. Some very popular children got bunches of cards. Drew heard her name called quite often and was having a wonderful time. But then she became aware that the little girl sitting in front of her had received no cards. Her head was drooping lower and lower. Then suddenly the postman called this little girl's name and delivered to her **one valentine**. Her face lit up like morning sunshine. She tore open that valentine, hurrying to see who had cared enough to send it. Drew looked over her shoulder and saw that it was signed "Your secret admirer." The little girl smiled and glanced around the room, wondering who it could be. "But", said Drew, "I knew who it was but I didn't tell. I recognized my mother's handwriting." Drew's mother had obtained a class roster and had sent a card to **every child in the class**. Drew learned from her mother what her mother learned from God: **that God's love reaches even the unlovely, and everybody is invited to God's party!**

Evangelism is no simple task, but we see how simple it can be with the simultaneous celebration of Valentine's Day and the Transfiguration of our Lord. LISTEN TO GOD! *"My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the Strength of my heart and my Portion forever" (Psalm 73:26)*. As we mingle, connect, interact and communicate with the world around us in the continuation of the pandemic – take time to **listen to Jesus**. Your circumstances may bespeak struggles, challenges, disappointment, failure and a host of other unpleasantries. **But no doubt about it – you are loved**. And so is everyone we set our eyes upon. Therefore, whether you are a head, hands or heart person, you recognize the need for the world where God has placed you to listen to Jesus as well.

As we witness once again the Transfiguration of our Lord this Valentine's Day, LISTEN TO JESUS! Through His authoritative and powerful Word along with His presence and grace, you are transformed: from sinner to child of God, from unholy to holy, **from dead to living**. This transformation is critical for all of us as we continue to battle on against all the challenges of our day. Victory in Christ is yours. YOU ARE LOVED. **Listen to Jesus, only Jesus**, no matter what you see and experience, lest you listen to the world that offers no grace, no life, no hope, no real love.

In our English District, we know that love radiating from Jesus through our Bishop, District servants, congregational pastors, our Lutheran schools and teachers, our Sunday school teachers and those with whom we share the pew in weekly worship. What a cloud of witnesses to God's saving and renewing love. **Together, let's share this love boldly**. *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16)*. This is not only the "Gospel in a Nutshell" but our daily mission as God's people. We listen to God. Hear that the world in which we live is loved. And we live this out in the world as evangelists (witnesses of God's saving love). Together we will face the upcoming Lenten journey hearing, seeing and experiencing the love that was settled once and for all at the Cross of Jesus. Let this truth be one of the life-changing experiences in our English District family – the bold sharing this truth with the world: There's no doubt about it – YOU ARE LOVED!

In Christ Alone ~ Reverend John Diener

English District Evangelization Team