

What I Did for Love (Love 1)
Hebrews 9:11-14 **Mark 12:28-34**

I suppose it is not news to anyone here that I am a fan of the modern musical theatre. Between Sue and I we have been involved in dozens of shows and hundreds of performances, as actors, designers and directors. From the smallest, most intimate cast shows to the huge cast of hundreds, I love them all.

I suppose my love affair started when I was young; these musicals were big, fun, and colorful...a delight to the eye and ear. Lots to watch, lots to hear...they were great.

And, occasionally, there is that one “thing”, perhaps a line, sometimes a song, that touches me; speaks to me at a unique, personal level. I remember the first time I saw “The Man of La Mancha”. I loved the show but fell in love with the song “The Impossible Dream”. The idea of doing what was right because it was right, no matter what, spoke to me on a deep, visceral level.

Although there are many shows that I could quote, or sing, or recite I suspect, another comes to mind as we begin this new series of sermons on Love.

In the mid 1970’s a big, splashy musical about “everyone else” hit the stage. Not about the leads or the people whose names are up in lights, “Chorus Line” focused on everyone else, auditioning for the nameless supporting role of the chorus line that makes the big production what it is.

Chorus Line is a fun romp with lots of unique characters, storylines and stereotypes. Anyone who has been involved with musical theatre will recognize some of the people on stage...or IS one of the people on stage!

However, amongst all the fun and frolic, there is one song that haunts me. As the auditions continue, the characters are singing and dancing and it’s all bright and energetic, until one of the characters takes a bad fall, destroying his knee...and his career...and all chances of ever dancing again.

While others help him offstage, knowing already that he will never dance again, the remaining dancers gather to reflect on how that could have easily been any one of them.

One outspoken character replies with a poignant, hopeful song in the midst of this devastating event:

The song, "What I Did for Love" included these words:

Look, my eyes are dry The gift was ours to borrow
It's as if we always knew And I won't forget what I did for love
What I did for love

What I did for love.

In a world that preaches hatred and division, what IS love...and what does it mean for those of us who proclaim Christ, and Him crucified? And just what is it WE do, or are willing to do for love?

Today is the day we celebrate All Saints Day; a celebration of all the Saints of the Church, those who have gone before and have handed us this legacy of faith and congregation, as well as those who continue to serve today and those who are yet to come. It is also a perfect day to begin a month-long series on the Gift of Love.

Don't be confused about the Saints of the church; there are greater saints whose names grace holidays, lesser saints whose names appear only in reference books and every-day saints who may well be sitting next to you in the pew this morning.

You see, we have lost an understanding of what "saint" is in the church. Sure, there are the incredible men and women whose lives inspire us, but the bible instructs that ALL who are living their lives in faithfulness are the saints of the church. Every. Last. One.

So when we gather to celebrate All Saints Day, we are NOT gathering to admire the handiwork of someone else and then free to move on to other pursuits...we ARE gathering to witness to those who have built our legacy of faith and presented it to us, even as we acknowledge this precious gift and our responsibility to preserve it for those yet to come.

All Saints Day causes us to reflect, much like the words of that song:
The gift was ours to borrow, It's as if we always knew, And I won't forget what I did for love.

What we do for love. Amazing things, really. Superhuman, selfless, passionate...all words to describe what people are willing to do for love. So it's only appropriate that we use this day to begin our journey into this thing called "Love".

Love is, however, a tricky thing. It was a word I was afraid of when I was young as it was used so often I wasn't sure what it really meant. What is the concept, the meaning, the grounding of this thing called love?

That's a great place to begin!

Many religious and philosophical traditions claim that there are three centers of human nature. There is the mind, which is the center for thinking, intellect and understanding. There is the body, which governs one's actions, behavior, and strength. And there is the heart, which guides emotions and the ability to be in relationships with others.

These three poles are quite common archetypes, used to describe our human experience. To return to the theater, all we need to do is look at another famous musical to see this played out. Remember Dorothy? The little girl from Kansas? Think of her three traveling companions as she sought to find Oz: a lion (who wanted strength or courage to perform the right deeds), a scarecrow (who longed for a brain, to master intellect and reason), and a tin man (who wanted a heart and the emotional capacity to sympathize and feel).

Surprised? This is a common part of the human journey...a critical part, in fact.

Jesus summarized this quite nicely in our reading today from Mark's Gospel. When Jesus pronounced this greatest commandment as the "first of all," He was saying that we needed to offer God the entirety of who we are. Remember the words?

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

The heart, soul, mind and strength of a person compose the totality of who we are, and God deserves to have all of who we are...in obedience and surrender. When the scribe responded affirmatively, Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God".

What a statement; this has the potential to impact us, and challenge us, in every part of our lives!

In the near future we will begin our autumn stewardship campaign. How does it change the way we look at finances in the congregation if we change our focus from giving to church budgets and expenses to a giving that is based on love – love of God and love of neighbor? What are we saying to those saints of THIS church as we care for their legacy...and to those who are yet to come as we prepare for them?

Recalibrating our understanding of stewardship in this way requires and entirely new view, a new understanding of the totality of our life, including the mind in the way we relate to money, the heart in the way we associate possessions with pleasure, and the body, in the way we choose to spend, save and give money.

Once again, we are reminded that it is not the amount we give, but the motivation that drives our decision to give that draws us forward until we are indeed, “not far from the kingdom of God.” We ALWAYS have the option to offer a “tip” to God or respond in love to all that God provides for us.

This simple phrase also causes us to refocus on our celebration of All Saints Day. On this day we remember those who have gone before us and demonstrated through their witness and example the kind of total love advocated in this text. As we recall the way the saints have embodied love for God and others, we recognize that they are now close to the kingdom themselves, in a real and cosmic way, forming the “cloud of witnesses” described in Hebrews.

Some of these saints are the names of legend and story: Patrick, Columba, Brigid, Francis. These are the saints who have brought the faith to us today.

Some of the saints have names that are less familiar: Bill, Susie, Thomas, Fred, Ingrid, Oma. These are only a few of the saints who have built this congregation and left their legacy to us.

More importantly, when we choose to live lives following their example through our own lives, the saints, both great and small, become the channels through which we too might be “not far from the kingdom of God.”

Back at the beginning of this sermon I quoted from a musical theatre song, "What I Did for Love". Hear a few of those words again:

*The gift was ours to borrow, it's as if we always knew
And I won't forget what I did for love*

God has gifted you with a precious gift of mind, body and heart. You did nothing to earn them, please don't forget that, they are a gift.

They are also on loan. We HAVE always known that: It's a gift we borrow.

In a world of fear, divisions, hatred, self-interest, Jesus reminds us of the greatest commandment of all. Today we celebrate the saints, whose examples give us guidance, courage and hope. At the end of the day, it is HOW we love God and our neighbors that will determine how close we draw towards the Kingdom of God.

In retrospect, we will not forget what we did for love.
And neither will God.