

Today is Valentine's Day. Although it's not part of the church year and we are not using red altar cloths, Valentine's Day lends itself to today's Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy. While the theme of Valentine's Day is love, more specifically it is about EXPRESSING love, letting someone know that you love them. And so some token of love...some concrete, tangible way is found to communicate love. It seems that over the years at least in our culture there are two primary ways that love is communicated on Feb. 14. Valentine cards are as embedded in our culture as parades are on the 4th of July. Valentine cards express love with well-chosen words. And as you know, the other very important way to express love on Valentine's Day is... chocolate! Cards and chocolate; words and food, there you have it! Those are the main ingredients on Valentine's Day, words which please the heart and food that pleases the palate – what better ways are there to communicate love? And do you know who agrees? Moses agrees. God's prophet extraordinaire affirms that the way to communicate love is through something tangible and concrete, like loving words and delicious food. Let me explain.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul.” Those agents of love; heart, mind, and soul are all lodged within you. But love for God, just like love for people needs to be expressed. By its very nature love isn't merely something internal, kept tucked away, it needs to be come out. Moses instructed the people how to show love to God. Keep in mind that our whole life is to be a “living sacrifice” but Moses zeroes in on two specifics. “Love God”, he says, with good words and good food. Let's talk about chocolate first. Moses says, “you shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground which you shall bring in from your land that the Lord your God gives you and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish His name.” But did the Israelites bring chocolate? What delicious food they brought wasn't the vital thing. That it was the best, the very, very best, the highest quality, top shelf, first fruits, that WAS essential. Their gift to God, their best of the best chocolate said something. It said that God was worthy of the best that they could give. You've heard the expression, “money talks”. That is absolutely true. Money speaks loudly. You put your money in what you care about. It's easy to tell what you care about simply by looking at your check book or your VISA statement. No, we don't use chocolate as our currency. Nor do we bring God offerings of grain. We use cash and checks. The sweetness to God, what makes it top shelf, delicious and delightful to Him, is the spirit with which you give your offering. The Lord loves a cheerful giver. Why? Because a cheerful giver gives because they want to. A cheerful giver is motivated by love. A cheerful giver finds enjoyment, pleasure in giving. Do you struggle to find joy in giving to the Lord? Is it hard for you to tithe? Then listen to the other part of Moses' methodology in giving to the Lord.

Moses says, 'when you bring your chocolate to God...your fine food offering, your first fruits cash; then do this: "Open your mouth and tell the priest the good things God has done for you." Moses gives them an example to kind of prime the pump, get the creative giving juices flowing. Reminding them of their forefathers, those known as the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob... Moses instructs that they say to the priest, "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt, few in number, but there he became a great, mighty, and populous nation, and the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us and enforced hard labor upon us, but we cried to the Lord and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with great terror and with signs and wonders" The "chocolate" they brought to God, the material gift that expressed gratitude was to be accompanied by a Valentine... a verbal expression of why they were grateful to God...a specific, overt, from their own lips, personal testimony. They had come from nothing and God had given them everything. They were not successful (like people love to think) simply because they were smart and worked hard. They had it good because God was good to them.

In what specific ways do you know that God has been good to you? In what ways has He reached down and pulled you up? Starting with your baptism God reached down to pull you up from your sins. I can't remember that. God reached down to me before I was even aware of Him and for those of you baptized as infants the story is the same. God was reaching out to you in love before you even had any awareness of Him. My parents tell me how God reached down to me as a tiny infant when I nearly died of spinal meningitis and He saved my life. He is worthy of my verbally expressing gratitude. He is worthy of my offering. Hasn't God shown His love when you a wandering Aramean? When you were heading down the wrong road due to bad choices you made, trapped in sexual sins, struggling with addictions, when you were telling lies and using deception, when you were cruel to others, or disrespectful to your parents, isn't it fantastic that you have a loving God who forgives your sins? Isn't it good news that even when you and I have been unfaithful to Him He has always been faithful to you and me?

Today, God speaks to you. His Word is aimed right at you and says (in the vernacular) bring Him the finest chocolate available. Make your Valentine to Him the most personal of all because you've written it yourself. Tell Him why you are grateful, why you love Him. Your enemy the devil ever seeks to prevent you from doing that. One of His tried and true methods is to make you think you have nothing for which to be thankful. He wants you to believe that you have so little to bring as an offering because God has been so cheap and miserly with you. LIE! Moses said that when bringing your gift to God, your chocolate, conclude your words of gratitude to Him like this: "He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." That hopeful, joyous, grateful, attitude will not be learned from any political candidate. Their message is that things have never been worse. The only reason to be hopeful is by voting for them. Gratitude can't be learned even from your own heart.

It is the Holy Spirit that works in you to say, "God has been good to me. He fills MY cup to overflowing. I am the one who enjoys milk and honey in material blessings. I am the one who is especially blessed because I know Jesus loves me. I know Jesus forgives my sins today.

Bring God your offering from the abundant supply with which He has blessed you. Put the fine chocolate in the envelope even before money for the essentials of groceries and housing is paid out. Your FIRST fruits please God. Your offering to Him is your joyful expression of gratitude for His love in your life. Send God a Valentine in your own words. Send Him the finest chocolate, the best of the best from your wealth that says I love you because you first loved me. Amen.