

Perhaps if you were asked to think of places where you'd see two people in love, you might think of a lakeside, or a nice restaurant. But as a priest, I'd have to say some of the most powerful displays I've seen with respect to love have come when I've visited people advanced in age, with one providing care for the other in their home, and seeing first hand how deeply in love these people still are.

Phyllis Jardine, who works as a nurse who provides care for the elderly, realized this one day when she met the husband of one of her new clients she would be helping to care for.

In reflecting on that day, she writes how a gentle, old man met her on a footpath. Mesmerized by the swaying treetops and the multitude of birds at his feeders, she stood motionless, admiring the view.

Pleased, the man watched Phyllis glancing toward the silvery creek beckoning from below. "This property was our dream, " he said. "Planned many years ago. There are even mushrooms down there by the creek," he offered. "We'll go for a walk later."

His wife had been referred by her family doctor and Phyllis was to coordinate the services the couple would need for the next little while. As a visiting nurse, she'd grown accustomed to being thrust unexpectedly into people's suffering. She'd even developed a shield, a protective mechanism to do her job. But she wasn't prepared for the effect this visit would have on her personally.

The tall, dignified man in his 80s politely invited her into his home. Hearing voices, she learned that his wife and her priest were talking and praying in the next room. This gave Phyllis and the man time to get acquainted.

Looking about the comfortable home, Phyllis imagined what it must have been like in days gone by: lively conversations, noisy games, and lots of laughter. The furniture, the rugs, all showed years of family use. So much character. Phyllis felt like an intruder, but the man seemed pleased to have her there. He wanted to talk, and needed to talk.

He told Phyllis that he and his wife had been married for 62 years and as a young couple had come to Canada to raise their family. Their children, who

now lived in different provinces, were expected to home in the next few days. And then he talked about his wife. The love of his life.

“When we first moved here, she became very melancholy,” he said. “So I took her back to the old country. Within a few years she was ready to return to our new home.” He pointed out photos of his wife and his sons and daughter. “There were lots of trials and tribulations for sure, but oh, so much love,” he reflected. “And now she’s ready to leave again.”

When the priest left, he escorted Phyllis into her sickroom. Obviously very ill, the frail little lady in the big bed was alert and responding, trying bravely to resist the urgency to sleep. She looked lovingly at her husband; however she wasn’t so sure about Phyllis.

“I’m not afraid to die,” she whispered. “But I don’t want to go to the hospital.”

Only when Phyllis reassured her that the purpose of her visit was to help her stay at home did she relax. Every breath, however, was labored. When Phyllis finished her assessment, she proposed a care plan and asked for

their input that included people to help until family arrived and daily care from the nurse. But as she was planning the medical care for the woman, Phyllis noticed something else. She sensed the love and compassion in the room. Then something beautiful happened. The old man confidently picked up his delicate wife and carried her across the room. This gesture probably occurred many times in the past; however as a bystander, watching such devotion, Phyllis was awestruck. He carefully placed her in a soft chair beside the bay window overlooking her flowerbeds and their creek. What struck Phyllis though was the man's tenderness. As if he was carrying all his worldly possessions to the altar of our Lord. He took her tiny hand in his and, lost in thought (forgetting that Phyllis was even in the room) his easy voice lifted in song.

"I'll be loving you always. Not just for an hour, not just for a day, not for just a year, but always. Always."

"She's my world," he said when he finished. "Whatever you can do will be appreciated." It was indeed a poignant and moment for Phyllis when she learned something incredible about love.

She closes her reflection by writing that love indeed shows you whole new rooms in your heart. Life suddenly becomes all the more precious. He wasn't afraid. She wasn't afraid. There was no anxiety. They simply wanted to spend their last days together. Phyllis felt her heart lurch. She knew she was witnessing something close to God. Absolute love between two people. The scene touched her deeply and reminded her to cherish the love and the close bond she had with her own husband.

Later, the gentle old man and Phyllis did take their walk down to the creek. With the stillness that comes with the end of the day, he stood beside her, gazing intently, a profound calmness about him. Through the mist building behind her eyes, she too saw and felt the splendor, as if God had left a portrait of Himself on the mangle of earth.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asked the man?

"Oh, I think so," he said. "I know it will take courage to honor this pain I carry, to trust the unfolding. But I truly believe we'll be together one day. Together, always."

Now I realize that while today is Valentine's Day that the Mass of the day is Ash Wednesday. And while when you hear that story, you might think a wedding is about to break out. (Truth be told, I have used it at a wedding). But it's also very appropriate for Ash Wednesday, and the two days we celebrate today really go hand in hand for the Christian.

While "love" to some might mean a romantic candlelit dinner or a walk along a beach, any couple knows that is just part of it. The love of a marriage takes work. And that's what I love with the story of this elderly couple. The kind of love they have, the kind of selfless love that Phyllis saw as the man lifted his wife and brought her to her favorite spot by the window, the love she saw in his eyes, that's what we all want. And I'm not talking about just the romantic kind of love - rather the love in our relationships, the peace in our lives where we can feel cared for, but also bring that to the people who fill our lives.

The problem is as we go through this life towards the next, it can be hard to love in the way that Phyllis saw that day. That's not to say that people are cruel or mean; it's just things happen where gradually, we can turn inward.

We can become selfish; we can become forgetful of God or others; or just think that being average is good enough. That's not the way of the Christian though.

Every time we come to Mass, we look at a crucifix. Every time we pray we make the Sign of the Cross. And every Catholic wedding takes place in a church in front of a crucifix too. The reason isn't to focus on how Jesus died. Rather it's to focus on how He lived - in a completely selfless way, loving as we hear in the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer, to the end. And that's why perhaps Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day go perfectly together, because when two people have a bond as strong as the one Phyllis saw that day, they are a sign to others of what love looks like in action. We all can do that too, but only if we look at the cross not just as a symbol, but as a reminder of how we are to love God and one another.

Lent gives us the opportunity to do that. Each year, we enter into this period of 40 days not to just give something up or get some ashes on our forehead, but to do an examination of our lives and our priorities. The ashes symbolize something that once was; and so often we put our energies into the things that fade away. Even the things that aren't tangible

can fade away too that we cling to, like power or popularity or glory for ourselves. When we come to Lent, we can say “where am I going? Who do I want to be as a person?” Hopefully the answer to that is exactly what Phyllis saw between that couple - a person who loves perfectly.

As the season unfolds, the Church traditionally gives us three ways to grow in grace and love.

One is prayer. How often do we pray? We do not have to be a monk or nun living in a monastery and pray for hours a day, but prayer has to be a part of our lives. And let’s face it, it can take a back seat to entertainment, to a busy schedule, and the other stuff that fills our lives. The Church asks me as a priest to pray daily the Liturgy of the Hours; I made a commitment to do that so it’s a job requirement. But for the rest of us, technically all you have to do is to come to Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. Well, you are here tonight, and it’s not even an obligatory holy day, so that says a lot about your faith. But try to get into the habit of praying more during Lent, and ideally that will carry over. Try different kinds of prayer. Spend time with the Scriptures. Remember sometimes you can just simply sit in silence too. Prayer is active or contemplative too. Maybe come to

Stations of the Cross, or try to make a daily Mass if you are able. Pray as a family so kids learn the importance of it. Prayer is not there so God can hear how great He is from us. Prayer is for our benefit to bring us closer to God, to help us learn His will for us, and to help us think of the needs of other people. We shouldn't say "I love you" to God just once a week.

Almsgiving is another thing we do in Lent, but that too should be a way of life. Part of that is financial, how we support charities. But again, think outside of the box. The man in the story loved his wife so much he was at her side all the time, even if she had care from others. He went above and beyond for her. It's important we too ask ourselves how we can give of our time to others by helping others around the house, being attentive to the needs of family, and visiting relatives we might not see too much, especially the homebound.

Lastly, we fast. And with this, there's a much better way to do that than from food. Even from food we only fast from snacks on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and have 2 small meals and one full meal. The holy father has the following suggestions for the season: Fast from hurting words and say kind words; Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude; Fast from

anger and be filled with patience; Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope; Fast from worries and have trust in God; Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity; Fast from pressures and be prayerful; Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy; Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others; Fast from grudges and be reconciled; Fast from words and be silent so you can listen. Fasting can also refer to going without something for Lent. And while there's nothing wrong with giving something up, is not having chocolate for 40 days going to make you a better person? Perhaps for health, but maybe you say give up going out on Fridays and come to Stations of the Cross instead, or you give up "me" time to volunteer or spend more time with your family. Doing these things along with the ideas of the Holy Father are a great way to emerge a better person come Easter Sunday.

Inside all of us is such potential. God in His wisdom sees this, which is why He became one of us and died, and in his last words said forgive them, they know not what they do. He showed us how to love one another through what He did for us. But you and I have a job to do. To open up our eyes and look at the cross and remember that that love must be a way of life, not just a once-a-year celebration on February 14th. Love is beautiful,

but it also requires work, sacrifice and commitment. But just as Jesus saved us all through what He did for us, we too can bring one another to God just as that elderly husband did for his wife and she did for him over the course of their marriage. So look inside your hearts and souls, and see the person God knows you can become, and use this season to do just that, using the love that is God's grace and mercy to transform yourselves into a vessel that fills the world with the love of God.