

Community Church of Issaquah
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The Greatest of These Is Love

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There seems to be no escaping it – this thing called holidays. Did you notice that even before the final Christmas sales, every retail store was pushing the next holiday which happens this week. If you've paid attention, you see heart shaped everything such as balloons, candies and more. Many people think this holiday was an invention of the Hallmark Card company, or Hershey's Chocolates, or the floral industry. I certainly would never want to burst your heart shaped balloon with facts, but perhaps you should know that St. Valentine's Day began in the year 496 AD. For the Christian church, it's celebrated on February 14th, and for the Orthodox church on June 6th. Let me tell you a little about this story that has some pretty remarkable elements.

There once was a Roman priest who lived in central Italy in the mid 200's AD during the reign of Emperor Claudius who was known for his persecution of Christians and the church. His name was Valentinus or as we call him, Valentine. He first became known to Roman authorities when he began to perform marriages for young people. At that time, it was forbidden for young men to marry because it was believed that unmarried men were better fighting soldiers. Married soldiers, it was thought, might be afraid

of what might happen to them or their wives and families if they died in action. Oddly, polygamy was very popular at this particular time in history.

Even some of these polygamists were attracted to the church and Christian faith. When Valentine encouraged them to marry within the Christian church and secretly performed their marriages, the church was not happy about that. It didn't take long for Valentine to be caught by the authorities. He was imprisoned and tortured for having performed the marriages in violation of Emperor Claudius's mandate. And it is in prison that the story about Valentine takes a turn.

One of the men who was to be the judge over Valentine, Asterius, had a daughter who was blind. Having seen this child, Valentine prayed with her and she was healed, which so astonished Asterius that he became a Christian as a result of this miracle. The judge, his family and the forty-four members of his household servants became Christians and were all baptized. The judge freed all the Christian inmates, including Valentine, but that was not to last long. He was later arrested for continuing to evangelize and convert people to Christianity.

Valentine was taken to Rome this time and was sent directly to face Emperor Claudius. But Claudius actually like Valentine until he tried to convert the emperor. Claudius rejected that and condemned Valentine to death. He demanded that Valentine either renounce his faith or be

beaten with clubs and beheaded. Valentine refused and was executed and beheaded on February 14th in the year 269. And now the part of the story you and I know and observe on his special day. It is said that before his execution, he wrote a note to the blind child he had healed and signed it, “from your Valentine.” Does that sound like something you’d see on the front of a Hallmark card? I thought so. Interestingly, St. Valentine is the patron saint for beekeepers, epilepsy, the plague, fainting and traveling. That’s not exactly what we celebrate his day for.

So what does this have to do with the beautiful Scripture passages we read this morning? We know the 13th chapter of First Corinthians as the beautiful words we hear over and over at weddings when the minister wants to emphasize the depth and meaning of love. There are times, however, when inspiring words need to be brought to life in the life of a real person. I don’t know that Valentine had ever read the passage that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, Greece. It’s doubtful. And yet, he lived his life with this as the foundation of who he was and what he did.

When we think about Valentine’s Day, we immediately assume it’s a time to get mushy and try to demonstrate how much we love someone. There is nothing wrong with that. I do the very same thing – sending cards, buying flowers, giving chocolates to those I love the most. I have a strong desire to live the words Paul writes here. Love is patient, love is kind, love doesn’t envy or boast, love is not proud, rude or self-seeking.

Valentine himself shows us some valuable principles of how we as Christians are to love and live. Imagine how he must have loved ministering to young people who wanted to get married and who were in love and wanting to share that love. Imagine how much Valentine must have loved being able to take the hand of a small blind girl and give her sight. Imagine how much he must have loved the Lord when he refused to renounce his faith, even though it meant death for him. When we think about the concept of love on a holiday like Valentine's Day, that's inspiring to hear that kind of personal example of loving.

When Paul wrote this beautiful portion of his letter to the Christians in Corinth, he was writing to believers who had thought their faith was of lesser value because they were not apostles or teachers or healers or speakers in tongues or prophets. They had somehow come to think they were not of worth or value. They had seen the amazing works of Paul and others and were desirous of doing exactly the same thing, believing that once you became a believer in Christ, you had all of those powers of abilities. Paul wanted to tell them what the greatest wealth of a believer was and what the greatest gift one could give in life. "Do you desire the greatest gifts? Then let me tell you what they are."

If I can do all the things you think are essential to be a believer but don't have love, then you have nothing. Sure, I might have the gift of prophecy, and I know everything, and

I have a faith that could move mountains but if I don't know how to love, I don't have anything. And if I gave all my possessions to the poor and even die a martyr's death, but I don't have love, it's all in vain.

And then he went on to tell them exactly what he meant by the word 'love.' His definition was like this – love is patient, kind, doesn't envy, doesn't boast or brag, is not proud or rude, is not only interested in self. Love doesn't get angry very easy or keep records of the wrongs that people do to you; it doesn't like evil but gets pleasure out of the truth. It always protects, trusts, hopes, and endures. And the best part about love? "Love never fails."

This was a whole new concern of the Gospel that these women and men had not considered. They treasured the knowledge that God is love, and they tried to follow the teaching that we must love our neighbors as we love ourselves. But to have this life-changing and new way of thinking about the concept of love must have been like a breath of fresh air to them. Imagine one saying, "I don't have to be an apostle. If I practice love like Paul says, I am doing the best work ever."

My favorite portion of this chapter is a message that I try to repeat to myself often, lest I forget. "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child but when I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." Like the believers in Corinth, I used to think that if I weren't an apostle or didn't have the gift of healing, or

couldn't foresee and tell what God wanted in prophecy, then I wasn't really ever going to amount to much. When I have those doubts arising in my head, I always come back to this beautiful passage of scripture and reassure myself that if I practice the kind of love Paul is talking about, then my life has great value.

Paul closes this letter of passion with these words, "And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love." That's a wonderful message for us this very day and as we anticipate a holiday that causes us to focus on love. This morning I want us to experience some of that infectious love that Paul tells us about. We're going to love each other.