

Community Church of Issaquah
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When Love Is a Gift

Rev. Vincent Lachina

You might not remember but I told you before a story about the holiday that we observed yesterday – Valentine’s Day. 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, before Hallmark made cards or florists sold a million roses or chocolates were everywhere. For the Christian church, Valentine’s Day is celebrated on February 14th, and for the Orthodox church on June 6th. Let me tell you again 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 liked 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 asked, "Do you desire the greatest gifts? Then let me tell you what they are." And that was his message we read today. When we read that passage, we might not think of either of those three things as a gift. Do you ever think about loving someone as offering them a gift? Or if you are loved by someone, thinking that you have received a beautiful gift called love? This has been an awareness for me for some time now – that I am able to give someone the gift of love, and that I also receive the gift of love from others. Love is a gift? Hard to explain.

If I can do all the things Paul told believers to do – have faith, hope, and love --but don't have love to give to other, then I have nothing. Sure, I might have the gift of prophecy, and the gift of knowing everything, and I have been gifted with a faith that could move mountains but if I don't know how to give 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 that I can give to others, it's all in vain.

And Paul he went on to tell them exactly what he meant by the gift of '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." Is that the kind of love that you want to give away and receive?

This was a whole new concern of the Gospel that these women and men had not considered. They treasured the knowledge that God gives love to us all, and they tried to follow the teaching that we must give love to our neighbors as we give love to ourselves. But to have this life-changing and new way of thinking about the concept of love as a gift 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 giving 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 an adult, 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 – the GIFT of love, 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.” Do you remember that old adage, “It is better to give than receive”? Well, I think that has a double meaning. I would rather someone tell me that it is just as beautiful to give love as it is to receive love. Think about this for a minute. Who are you giving love to and from whom are you receiving love? In addition to the gift of love that our Lord gifts to you are you a grateful receiver? And do you try to give that same gift back not just to God, but to others and to yourself. Don’t you remember what Jesus said, “Love God with all you mind and soul and body and love others as much as you love yourself.” Let me close with this encouragement. Will you gift a massive of love to yourself? Keep in mind the final words in the 13th Chapter of I Corinthians. Three powerful words. Love never fails. And neither do we when we offer the gift of love and are grateful to receive love.