

This week we celebrate Valentine's Day, the so-called "day of love" in the US and around the world. In the US kids exchange valentine cards at school, young couples may have a special date or exchange flowers and candy. Valentine presents are becoming a little more common, usually either a stuffed animal or jewelry, depending on your age and station in life I guess, and Valentine's day is the second highest card sending holiday after Christmas. Lately there has been a revolt against what many people think of as a made-up holiday and at the library this week the teen programmer held an "anti-Valentine" party.

So I thought I'd look into this holiday a little bit, to see where it came from and who it's named for. It turns out that there is more than one St. Valentine recognized by the Catholic church—and they were all martyred. There are several different stories that explain their martyrdom; one, that Emperor Claudius 2 of Rome decreed that single men made better soldiers than married ones and so young men must not marry. Valentine disobeyed this decree and continued to marry couples in secret; he was put to death, on February 14 nonetheless, when his disobedience to Rome was discovered.

Another story maintains that St. Valentine was a key figure in helping Christians escape from prisons where they were beaten and tortured for their faith. He was caught and put in prison himself but fell in love with a young woman, to whom he sent what was possibly the first valentine card, signed "from your Valentine." Whatever story is correct, Valentine became a saint, with a feast day, celebrated in mid-February.

It is also suggested that the February date was chosen to replace for Christians a pagan holiday known as Lupercalia. Lupercalia was a fertility festival and existed until sometime in the 5th century when it was outlawed by Pope Gelasius. It remained merely a feast day until the middle ages, when the common belief was that February 14 marked the beginning of mating season for birds. This seems to have marked that date as a day for romance! Valentine greetings began around this time, and in 1415 the oldest known valentine was written. From then on Valentines Day grew in popularity as a day for love; however, due to the murkiness of its origins was taken off the list of official feast days. Today Valentine's day is celebrated in the US, Mexico, Canada, France, Australia and Great Britain.

It's interesting to me how the focus of the celebration has gone from a priest martyred for his faith to a day dedicated to romantic love. Romantic love is a good thing, don't get me wrong; and at its best Valentine's day celebrates what's good about being in love. At its worst it can put an enormous amount of pressure on relationships, when the expression of love doesn't meet expectations; it can also make those without romantic relationships feel left out, unloved and unwanted. And as nice as it is to have a day to express our love for each other, it can be seen as falling short of the original feast of St. Valentine—a day that celebrated someone who showed valor and heroism in the defense of his beliefs, holding onto his faith even until his death.

Anyway we look at it we can ascribe certain virtues to celebrate on VDay. Loyalty, faith, and lovingkindness are all qualities that can be commended on Valentines day and really any day of the year. Even within the many different expressions of love—from best friend love to amorous love to love for God we find qualities that reflect our faith. God created us out of love; the act of creation was, for God who really didn't *need* to create an earth and all that is in it, an act of pure love. We know this because we ourselves love and we, made in the image of God, create out of love. Our relationships, whether platonic or romantic, are based in the lovingkindness of God; we find our reason for loving in our relationship with God.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus outlines what it means to love and be loved—maybe not in the way we think of loving someone, but the way God loves and intends for us to love. Two weeks ago

we talked about the Beatitudes—blessed are the meek, the poor, the hungry, all of those who are seen as “less than” by the powerful and wealthy. This is nothing new: all through the Old Testament God reminds the people to take care of those who can’t care for themselves: the widows and orphans and strangers in their midst. This they should do, if not out of love for the people themselves, then out of love for God. The Israelites are told through the prophet Micah to do justice, to love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Last week was to have been our second week with the Sermon on the Mount, but instead we heard a wonderful sermon by Rev. Stacey Midge; however, what we missed was Jesus reminding his disciples how to be love in the world. Be salt. Be light. Keep the commandments, which were not, by the way, intended to hem people in but to lead them toward a better, happier life. the commandment to love God with our whole being, and love our neighbors as ourselves, are fleshed out in the 10 commandments; we love God by not bringing anything bad to God’s name, by keeping the Lord’s day holy and by loving God above other gods. We love our neighbors as ourselves by not stealing from them, not killing them, not wanting the things they have, not lying about them to others.

Living in community can be complicated, though, as we have seen lately in the way people are dealing with each other. We are very divided, as are many places in our world; people are angry, there are deep rifts in families, people too often feel threatened rather than compassionate when someone else has need; and we’re too often just plain old mean to each other. We don’t follow the law of loving God and neighbor as well as we should and we’re cut off from each other, left alone or striking off on our own, loving ourselves first, God and neighbor last.

And there are a lot of lonely people out there, I think, because of this. I see them at the library, in the coffee shops, maybe even here. There’s Brianna, a Hispanic teenager who comes to the library, stays all afternoon and only goes home when we close. When she’s not glued to the computer she’s talking our ears off about anything we’ll listen to. There’s the elderly man who started coming in on a walker, that first day struggling to get to the reference desk for the restroom key, grumpily saying “why do I have to come all the way in here for the key?” then struggling out and back. There are the people who come first thing in the morning and stay all day, maybe using the computers, maybe sitting by the window, just needing a place to be. People looking for community, for kindness, for somewhere to belong.

In our passage from the Sermon on the Mount that we read today we see what it means to live in community, Jesus style. It isn’t good enough to not commit murder, we must control our anger, we must respect one another, we must be reconciled to one another. It isn’t good enough to be faithful to our spouses but we must not let ourselves even be tempted. It isn’t enough to swear an oath, we must speak truth always, letting our yes be yes and our no be no. These things and more will help us to live in community with each other in the way of Jesus. Loving God and neighbor as we love ourselves. Doing justice. Being kind. Taking care of the poor, the sick, the lonely, the refugees, the hungry, the homeless. Standing up for what we believe in without rancor, without insults, without degrading or denigrating each other. Loving others as God in Christ has loved us.

That’s a Valentine’s day I can really get behind.