



Make Love Not War: A History of Valentine's Day

A brief history of the origins of this day will lead us to reflect on the different kinds of love and how we grow in Christlike love.

Origins

Valentine's Day has its roots in the ancient Roman festival of Lupercalia, which occurred on February 15. On that day, priests would gather at the cave of Lupercal in Rome where, according to legend, Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, had been nursed as infants by a wolf. Outside the cave, priests sacrificed goats and a dog to Faunus, the Roman god of flocks and herds. In those days, the month of February came later in the spring when the weather warmed and many animals gave birth, so this ceremony was associated with fertility and new life. Two young men were anointed with the blood of the animals that had been sacrificed, which was then wiped off their heads with wool dipped in milk. They were given goatskin thongs and sent running through the streets of the city, lashing the thongs at the young women who watched the festivities. It was believed that the touch of the sacred thongs made a woman better able to bear children. The thongs were called *februa*, which comes from the Latin word for "purify." It is from this word that we get the name of our month February.¹

As Christianity gained a foothold in the Roman Empire, many pagan festivals began to be adapted around tales of Christian saints and martyrs. Lupercalia, the festival of fertility, became associated with the legend of St. Valentine. Valentine was a priest who lived in the third century during the time of the emperor Claudius II. Claudius was having difficulty recruiting young men to serve in his army. The men knew that if they joined the army, they would be away from home for years. Few were willing to leave their wives and families while they were sent to the distant reaches of the empire. Claudius



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thought that if young men did not get married, they would be more likely to join his army. To eliminate the attraction of home and family life, Claudius banned all engagements and marriages.

But love cannot be controlled by imperial edict. Young Christians continued to get married in secret, provided they could find a priest to marry them. That was not an easy thing to do since any priest who performed a marriage would be put to death. One priest named Valentine would meet privately with couples in candlelit rooms where he whispered the words of the marriage ceremony and the couple would exchange their vows in hushed tones so no one would overhear.

One day the authorities discovered Valentine and hauled him before the prefect of Rome, who sentenced him to death. As he waited in jail for the day of his execution, his admirers would visit him, bringing flowers and notes of support. One of his most ardent supporters was the daughter of the jailer. She spent hours with him bolstering his spirits and encouraging his faith. On the day of his death, February 14, 269, he wrote the girl

a note, thanking her for her friendship. He signed it "From your Valentine."²

Down through the centuries, the date of February 14 continued to be associated with matchmaking. Various Valentine's Day customs grew up around Europe, many involving the practice of young men drawing names of young women. The young men would give gifts or other tokens of affection to their "Valentines." By the late eighteenth century, it was common for young men to send their sweethearts letters or tokens of love. Enterprising printers in England began to manufacture Valentine's Day cards. As it became easier to send these tokens of affection, the popularity of the holiday spread, especially in England and America.³ Over the next 150 years, its observance waxed and waned until the mid-twentieth century when American retailers began to market the concept of a more elaborate observance that involves chocolates, roses, and candlelight dinners in elegant restaurants. The American Retail Federation estimates that Americans spent over \$16.9 billion for Valentine's Day in 2008, or \$120 per consumer.⁴

The Power of Romantic Love

Valentine's Day is a celebration of love, but is it the same kind of love that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 13:13 when he says that "faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love"? Is what we celebrate on February 14 the same love that is described in 1 John 4:16 which states, "God is love"?

The focus of Valentine's Day is romantic love. At the heart of romantic love is sexual attraction with all its mystery and excitement. Sexual attraction in human beings is a complex phenomenon. It involves more than merely the satisfaction of the biological need to reproduce. It involves the whole person. Sometimes people try to reduce human sexuality to nothing more than the need to satisfy a physical urge, but ultimately that approach to sex is empty and not satisfying. We find our deepest sexual fulfillment when sharing involves not just our bodies but also our emotions, our intellect, and our spirit.

Romance, then, offers the possibility of a relationship with another person that calls forth undiscovered and exciting aspects of who we are. At its basic level, it is the possibility of having certain needs met—not only a need for physical intimacy, but also our need to be known intimately and valued by another person. But more significantly, romance offers the possibility of a

relationship in which we discover more deeply who we are. When we reveal ourselves to our beloved, we comprehend ourselves.⁵ Whether in telling our stories, sharing our dreams, or giving ourselves physically to one who cherishes us, something develops in the context of a loving relationship that is more than the sum of what each individual brings to the other. Just as the sexual intimacy between a man and a woman has the potential to create a new human life, emotional and spiritual intimacy between two people can create a new quality of life in those who love each other.

Romance in the Bible

Romance and sexual love are celebrated in the Old Testament book Song of Solomon. It is the expression of two lovers' delight in one another. Often their physical desire is explicit in the poetry.

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine.
(Song of Solomon 1:2)

How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden!
You are stately as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.
I will climb the palm tree
and lay hold of its branches.
(Song of Solomon 7:6-8)

Down through the ages, many people have been uncomfortable that such erotic language is in Holy Scripture. Some, in order to explain away its sexuality, have interpreted Song of Solomon as an allegory of the love God has for us and of our deep longing for God. It is not wrong to read Song of Solomon as allegory, for Scripture can be read on many different levels of meaning. However, if we limit our understanding of Song of Solomon to allegory, we miss much of its beauty. It is obvious that this erotic desire is more than physical attraction. It sweeps up every aspect of the lovers' being and cries out an intimacy that goes to the depths of the soul.

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
(Song of Solomon 8:6)

God made us as embodied creatures, and Song of Solomon rejoices in the physical aspect of the love between two people.⁶

One key aspect of what Christians and Jews believe is that God created the physical world as good and that our bodies are gifts from God. The refrain of the story of creation in Genesis 1 is that God looked at creation at the end of each day and pronounced what had been created as good. A different account of creation in Genesis 2 ends with God blessing the sexual union of the man and the woman who were not ashamed of their naked bodies.

When God came among us in Jesus, God took on our human flesh. Jesus' body had the same needs as ours. He had to eat and drink and sleep. He suffered pain. Many of his miracles involved the healing of physical ailments. Scripture makes no mention that Jesus had any desire for sexual intimacy, but 1 Corinthians 7 presents celibacy as a special gift that God gives certain people so they can concentrate their energies on other work God has given them. When Jesus was raised from the dead, he was not a disembodied spirit. He had a resurrection body that was different from his earthly body, but it was a real body that Thomas was able to touch and that ate fish with Peter by the lakeshore. First Corinthians 15 asserts that we will have resurrection bodies when Christ returns and raises us from the dead. Scripture is clear that our bodies are gifts from God, temples of the Holy Spirit given to us so we can glorify God (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

However, another theme of Scripture is the story of how human beings misuse the good gifts God gives them. When enjoyed as God intends, sexual relationships let us give freely of ourselves, finding our true selves as we lose ourselves in the distinctiveness of the beloved. That is why Ephesians 5 compares the relationship between Christ and the church to marriage. Christ loves the church so much that he gives himself completely to us. We reciprocate by giving ourselves completely to Christ. When sexuality is separated from that kind of self-giving love it can become idolatry. Ancient Israel was tempted to worship fertility gods like Baal and Astarte. In the religion of Canaan, sex was something to be used to manipulate the gods into granting favors such as fertility and a bounteous crop. The Christians in Corinth thought that their spiritual redemption in Christ meant that it did not matter what they did with their bodies, so they engaged in sexual licentiousness and satisfied their lust without regard for the emotional and spiritual harm unbridled sex can have on the human soul. Because sex is so powerful and is associated with youthfulness and vitality, it has always been tempting to treat it as a way



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to gain power for ourselves rather than as a gift that takes us outside ourselves and points us to the kind of power we know in the self-giving love of God.

The Freedom of Commitment

One of the beauties of marriage is that two people make a commitment to each other that liberates them to know one another more deeply. By restricting their deepest commitment to one person, they are free to focus on that person and give of themselves without fear that their trust will be betrayed. As their separate personalities develop over the years, they grow along with each other and engage in a lifelong discovery of the delights of their partner.⁷

One of the challenges of marriage is keeping the romance alive. After living together for a length of time, it is easy to take the other person for granted. Partners in a marriage sometimes think they know all there is to know about their spouse, and the mystery of romance can disappear. Valentine's Day can be an opportunity for partners to say to one another what it is about the other person that thrills and gives life. It can be a time to listen to the other person attentively and stay in touch with what is going on in her or his soul in order to keep the intimacy alive. It can be a day, amid the demands of all the other days of the year, to focus totally on the other, the beloved, as a gift of God. The romance that is associated with Valentine's Day reminds us of the mystery and beauty that underlies our sexual attraction to the one we love. The gifts we give are not commodities exchanged so our beloved will reciprocate by meeting our physical and emotional needs. They are tokens of ourselves that we give freely because the one we love matters to us.

Love that's Not Just for Lovers

Although the focus of Valentine's Day is romantic love, lovers are not the only ones who celebrate it. It is popular with children who exchange cards with their classmates. Friends often send Valentine's greetings that have no overtones of romance or sexual attraction. Friendship is also a gift from God that teaches us how to live as Christ intends us to live.

As with romantic love, friendship cannot thrive when it is possessive or primarily concerned with oneself. Friendships often begin with mutual interests, common backgrounds, and compatible personalities. Friends enjoy being valued and appreciated by each other. Unlike romantic love, friendship does not involve an exclusive commitment. We can have numerous friends. Friendships come and go as our circumstances, interests, and commitments change. But friendship does require that we accept the other person for who they are. For friendship to flourish, we have to develop genuine concern for the other person and be willing to give up some degree of our comfort and interest for theirs. Like romantic love, in friendship we practice the kind of relationship that looks outward, notices the other person, and finds fulfillment in giving.⁸ In friendship we live out the kind of love that God has shown us in Christ.

Love that Embraces All

In Luke 10, Jesus affirms that the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor. He then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate what it means to love our neighbor. Obviously, the love Jesus commands to us in the parable is not the same love we celebrate on Valentine's Day. The Good Samaritan did not make a long-term commitment to the wounded traveler he helped. He did not enter into a relationship of mutual emotional and spiritual support. The Samaritan responded to human need, provided care, and, as far as we know, went on with his life. Romantic love is exclusively focused on one other person, and we can be friends with only a limited number of people. Lovers, family members, and friends put legitimate demands on us that limit our ability to care for others with the same intensity we care for them. We are not capable of deep emotional attachments to everyone we encounter, and it would not be appropriate for others to have the same

kind of love for my loved ones that I have for them.⁹ The kind of Christian love and fellowship that Jesus calls us to show to all people is not based on the kind of natural attraction we have for friends and loved ones. In fact, the expectation of close friendship from fellow church members often leads to deep disappointment in those who expect every member of their congregation to be a close friend.¹⁰ Many congregations with a large membership require or strongly encourage members to join small groups where they can nurture deeper friendships without the expectation that they have a close relationship with everyone in the church.

Nevertheless, the love we celebrate on Valentine's Day can help us grow in the kind of love that Jesus tells us to have for our neighbors. As we grow in our love for friends, family, and spouse, our hearts are opened to others. We grow in our understanding of how God loves them. Secure in the love of those to whom we have committed ourselves, we are free to serve others whom God loves. We serve in the name of Jesus, whose self-giving love is a model for us.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Edna Barth, *Hearts, Cupids, and Red Roses: The Story of the Valentine Symbols* (New York: Clarion Books, 1974), 10-11.
2. *Ibid.*, 8-9.
3. *Ibid.*, 13-15.
4. Carol Carter, "Creative Retailers Cash In on Valentine's Day Profits," <http://www.allbusiness.com/retail/retailers-miscellaneous-store-retailers-florist/6623325-1.html>.
5. Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), 159.
6. Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 23-71.
7. Diogenes Allen, *Love: Christian Romance, Marriage, Friendship* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1987), 74-77.
8. *Ibid.*, 14-61.
9. Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 168-78.
10. Allen, 57.