



CUPID OR CHRIST?
Matthew 5:43-48, I Cor. 13:1-8a

As you know from various television ads, newspaper ads and advertising circulars, today is Valentine's Day. It is unfortunate that Valentine's Day has been swept away with its emphasis on consumerism – like so many other special days in our modern-day culture.

I hope to share with you the Christian origin of this day – so you know what part to tap into and build your life around. However, I want to make it perfectly clear that my sermon today does not absolve any husband or husband-to-be from buying his special lady a very nice Valentine's Day gift.

Late in the Third Century, the Emperor Claudius decided it was time to totally eradicate Christianity from the face of the earth. He began a systematic plan of removing highly visible and important Christian leaders and executing them. He felt that this would be a deterrent to the church and all other future converts to the faith.

One such Christian leader was a priest by the name of Valentine. The emperor took him and publicly whipped and beat him and, to further the humiliation, imprisoned him. He declared to Valentine: "Either renounce the Lord Christ in front of all the people, or you will be executed." Valentine refused to renounce the faith.

The jailer's daughter watched all of these activities and because of the intensity of Valentine's commitment to Christ, she was deeply moved and impressed. She admired this type of commitment. It became contagious.

She observed with great anticipation his attitude, his outlook, and his approach to this evil and vicious assault upon him. The emperor sent his ambassador one last time to Valentine to offer him his life if he would only renounce his faith.

When Valentine refused to renounce his faith, they came to the jail cell to take him to his death. As he was leaving, he took a piece of paper and tore it into the shape of a heart and scribbled on it, "**Your Valentine**" and gave it to the jailer's daughter as he was removed from the jail cell. He was beheaded on February 14, 270 A.D.

In 496 A.D., the church declared him a saint. The church, in precious memory of this committed Christian man who was willing to die for his faith, started taking hearts and designing them with special messages on them and shared them with fellow

Christians to encourage them in the faith. Love can be crucified, but never stopped or defeated.

The two scripture lessons read today for your hearing, are two of the most inspiring and challenging to hear. They sound good for the church house – but what happens when we leave?

The famous English writer, G. K. Chesterton, once wrote, “It is not that Christianity has been tried and found boring. It is that it has been tried and found difficult and challenging.” It is difficult to be a real Christian outside these walls. It is tough to travel one mile – nevertheless the second in love and sacrifice.

The Christian faith is difficult and challenging because we are called to love. We love not only our family and friends, which can be a great challenge in itself - but our enemies as well. When we choose to love on our own power – we soon fail, because if someone else does not ‘measure up’ we soon find ourselves withholding our love.

FIRST, LOVE IS A DECISION – NOT ONLY A FEELING OR EMOTION.

From the Holy Lands to Northern Ireland, from South Africa to Iraq, from Tim McVeigh to Osama Bin Laden it is easy to hate.

We are really good at hating people because of skin color, ethnic origins, language, and religious orientation. It is simply unnatural to love. Every time someone debates with me the doctrine of original sin (better to be called inherited sin), I would tell them to read their local newspaper from the first page to the last page. Then listen to the full 30 minutes of the evening news. Visit a police station every day for an evening shift, and then come back to talk to me. They are overwhelmed by the sickness and shallowness of the human family. Scratch off skin from any human, and underneath there are ‘savage’ instincts.

For me personally, it is truly amazing that God love us at all. As St. Francis de Sales would say – what is so surprising is not solely the fact that God loves, but the full measure of God’s love. As the writer of **I John** makes perfectly clear, God took the initiative in declaring his love for us. It is not that we first loved God, but that God first loved us. God sought us – not that we sought Him.

Jesus does not give us a model for love – **he is the model**. Therefore, Jesus does not solely reveal the reality of love – **he is the LOVE OF GOD**. It is God’s love, made known in Jesus Christ that awakens within us the ability to love ourselves and other people. His love is the measure and standard. The love of God does not wait for you and me to repent to receive it – we repent, because we have come to experience the love of God, and then we want to live in that light and power, not our own. Nowhere in the Bible do I find a verse which declares that God said, “**Be good,**” and I love you. Rather, **I John** declares: Because I love you – you can become loving. I have provided the example and power. We are not saved by our repentance, but by the performance of Jesus Christ at the cross.

We repent in response to God's gift – or else it becomes another form of works. **Romans 5:8** declares, "But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."¹

John Wesley, our founder, wrote about 300 years ago, "**No man loves God by nature, any more than he does a stone. What we love we must delight in, but no person has naturally any delight in God.** In our natural state, we cannot conceive how any one should delight in God. We cannot attain it by our nature, unless we passed from spiritual death to life; that is, be born again from above – God."

A distinguished colleague writes, "There is a big difference between the love represented by God in Christ – and that symbolized by Cupid, an infant in diapers and blindfolded to boot. Far from blind, God's love is visionary, perceiving behind the armor most of us don the moment we are out of diapers. God's love doesn't seek value, it creates it." Christian recognize their value as a gift rather than as an achievement. He further states, "It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value."²

SECONDLY, GOD'S LOVE COMPELS US TO EXPRESS THAT LOVE TO ALL.

St. Augustine instructs us that there is a reason Jesus said the Greatest Commandment is to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. The love of God is the first to be **commanded** – but the love of your neighbor is the first to be **fulfilled** – or as I would say – the first expression of it. This is why the Apostle Paul taught us in **Galatians 5:6**, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."³ Then **I Cor. 13:2**, "And though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."⁴

When the earthquake recently struck the nation of Haiti – the very first thing we did after praying was to put our prayers and love into action. Our medium-sized church of 400 members has given over **\$12,000.00** to this effort. The United Methodist Women made and collected flood buckets months before it ever happened. Every year Pastor Ray and the Youth Leadership Team collect food during the parade for the local food bank. We have a Sunday School class that pays the tuition for a youngster to attend our Precious Ones Preschool. We empowered the St. Andrew's Potato Project ministry to supply food banks all across America. The list can go on and on. That is why the church is called the body of Christ. We are his hands and feet to a hurting world. We continue that healing ministry until he comes again.

In Nebraska, there was a student at the University Hospital in Lincoln. She wasn't the most beautiful, or most brilliant, or had the most bubbling personality. However, she had a conversion experience and accepted Jesus Christ as her Savior.

She started volunteering at a crippled children's hospital. On the first day she cared for a child whose head was much larger than his body, which also was disfigured and twisted. It seemed that even the nurses and the volunteers shied away from this child. She said, "**If Christ loves me, then he also loves this child.**" She started to work with this child. She would take puzzles every afternoon and talk to him even if the child wouldn't respond. She would sing, "Jesus Loves Me," and "Jesus Loves the Little Children." Day after day this continued.

Suddenly, one day a smile came to his face and the little boy started to talk. In the three months the child had been there, he had never made a response.

A team of doctors who were assigned to this little boy, went over to Laura, and said, "You have performed a miracle. Your love for this child is the strongest medicine we have ever seen." Yes, Cupid does not compel that kind of love – only Christ.

The late Dr. Donald Barnhouse shares that love is fundamental to all the fruits of the Spirit listed in **Galatians 5:22**. He said, "Love is the key. **Joy** is love singing. **Peace** is love resting. **Long-suffering** is love enduring. **Kindness** is love's touch. **Goodness** is love's character. **Faithfulness** is love's habit. **Gentleness** is love's self-forgetfulness. **Self-control** is love holding the reins. There simply would be no harvest of fruit without love."

Yes, this is what happens when we sit week by week under the preaching of God's word. This is what happens when we learn together in a class or Bible study of what love is – and what love is not. This is what happens when our hearts are set on fire in worship to reach up and touch the cross of Christ.

So, it is not wrong on Valentine's Day to give and share roses with someone – just be sure they are not an excuse for not giving yourself the other 364 days of the year.

THIRDLY, CHRIST'S LOVE REQUIRES COMMITMENT AND SACRIFICE.

Dr. Calvin Miller, whose writings have been a source of strength for my spiritual life, writes about an occasion when the devil tries to disguise himself as God. I share it with you:

"Look, Saint, I'm a God made warm by love," said a devil impersonating deity.

"I believe you," cried the Saint.

"May I see the scars you spend in loving me?"

"I have no scars!"

"Then you're no God! Nor do you love."⁵

For you see, Thornton Wilder was correct when he said, ‘In love’s army only the wounded may serve.’

Norman MacLean wrote a small book entitled, **A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT and other stories**. In it he tells the story of his Scottish Presbyterian family growing up in the great state of Montana. His father served as the Presbyterian pastor in Missoula, Montana. His younger brother always pushed the boundaries whether in fishing or behavior. He engages in a pattern of gambling and drinking which unfortunately plagues his entire life. One morning Norman must share the tragic news of the death of his younger brother with his mother and father.

One day in a church service in a sermon his minister father shares, “**Even when you do not completely understand someone you love, you can still love them completely.**”⁶ Yes, the truest measure of love is to love without measure. That is the difference between Cupid and Christ.

Isaac Watts expressed it so well when he wrote:

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small.
Love so amazing – so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”⁷

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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Preached at both services
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ENDNOTES

¹ Romans 5:8 NKJV.

² William Sloane Coffin, **THE COURAGE TO LOVE**, Harper and Row, 1982.

³ Galatians 5:6 NIV.

⁴ I Corinthians 13:2 NKJV.

⁵ Calvin Miller, **A SYMPHONY IN SAND**, Word Publishing, 1990, page 90.

⁶ Norman MacLean, **A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT and other stories**, 1976.

⁷ Isaac Watts, **“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,”** 4th stanza.
