

Thinking about Love on Valentine's Day

The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
Epiphany 5: February 15, 2009

Last Sunday I took some time to read from Steve Dague's contribution to our upcoming daily devotional guide for the Lenten season, as he reflected on the one-year anniversary of his life-changing fall from the rafters to the cold concrete floor in his garage last February by writing about how he has grown in faith with family and friends here at Zion. In his own words, he writes, "I just rejoice in knowing that we are not alone. What a wonderful, amazing, and blessed feeling this knowledge is, and that's what I want to share with my friends. I will not reflect on this one year anniversary with thoughts of tragedy on my mind. Instead, I rejoice in what I now know to be an incredible truth, that my faith and belief have been strengthened beyond my imagination. I want to share with you these feelings of the miraculous, the wonderful, the absolute magnificence of God's love and presence. I know that it is there for all of us."

The subtitle for our Lenten Devotional Guide, which offers reflections on *Growing in Faith with Family and Friends*, lifts up stories of fellow members sharing *Why We Love the Church*. In this regard, the one-year anniversary of Steve's fall has reminded all of us of the reality of an expanded sense of family that we have experienced here at Zion. Looking back, it is clear that we saw a need, heard God's call, and rallied to help. This past year has made Jesus' words at the end of chapter three in the Gospel of Mark come alive: "*Who are my mother and my brothers?*" Looking around him, he said, *'Here are my mother and my brothers and my sisters! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'*" (Mark 3:32-35) That's one thing that I love about the church. It teaches us about the reality of an expanded sense of family that gets the focus of our love off ourselves to include the many around us who need God's love and ours.

Another of the many things that I love about the church, somewhat related to this first gift of an expanded sense of extended family, is our experience of the church as a great place to raise our children, precisely because we know that our kids will learn about basic rules and values that keep our lives grounded in what's good and right and true. Our children will hear about basic rules like the Ten Commandments, along with seeing first-hand people who are interested in learning about the value of faith, the audacity of hope, and the meaning of love. In fact, we are more than merely *interested* in these things; *we are committed* to putting these values into action. The church offers so much at every level. We are a great community for teaching basic rules and values for kids and adults. At the same time, we're a community with a great and grand vision for understanding our world and God's will. We know that the world doesn't revolve around us, that we're called to make a difference by serving the cause of God's kingdom, reaching out to others in need, speaking up for those who are forgotten, overlooked, or just plain trampled over. What a great combination: a community for raising our children with knowledge of what's right, plus a community that engages us with a vision for what is truly good! Learning about the moral life requires more than a text book to read or a puzzle to ponder. It requires real people struggling and striving to make truth real by

translating God's grace into forgiveness and turning God's love into action. The reality of community makes all the difference.

Love is one of those topics where we can see the difference the church has made for as long as there has been a church. Let's face it, love can have many meanings and take many forms. On M-TV, we see a love that comes in a variety of shades of *me, myself, and I*. But Christianity has made it clear that love begins by moving beyond our excessive concern with ourselves, with what we're doing and how we're doing. True love gets us thinking about our neighbors, near and far. Our church community at Zion has been great at keeping up the constant drumbeat for this connection between love and service. We see it in our mission statement *to grow in love and service by grace*. It's a part of the ministries we offer with our Clothing Closet and Food Pantry. The connection between love and service has inspired us to organize mission trips to New Orleans, to join in the good work of Lutheran World Relief, to take up hammers and paint brushes with Habitat for Humanity, to reach out to families in need through the Giving Trees and Turkey Giveaways.

When the church came into being, Greek was the language of the day, and the language of the New Testament. There are many words for love in Greek – *eros*, referring to the passion of romance in its power to draw two persons together in the tightest of bonds and the closest of ways; *storge*, referring to the excitement of discovering something new, like the affection of a playful kitten, or a new puppy, hence the name puppy love; *philos*, referring to the enduring bonds of friendship rooted in common values and shared goals. Christians created yet another word for love, which has become its true measure and deepest meaning, namely, *agape*, referring to the sacrificial self-giving that was modeled in the life and death of the one who in said, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve" – to give life, his time, his energy, his all, in serving others. (Mark 10:45) I read this stuff in a book written by C.S. Lewis entitled *The Four Loves*; but more importantly, I have seen this stuff come to life in our church, in churches all across America, and all over the world, churches made up of ordinary people committed to learning about God's love by trying to live it. Books are great; but real people moved by God's love to reach out to others, standing for something bigger than ourselves, striving to make the world, our community, and ourselves better: that's what I love about the church, and that is what the church has been for us and for every generation since God's Spirit breathed new life into the community God calls the body of Christ.

That's part of the significance of Saint Valentine, who one-thousand seven-hundred and forty years ago said NO to the world's willingness to use people for short-term gains of war and wealth, and YES to a God who doesn't want us to abandon the weak to rulers who would be tyrants. Sure, we think of Valentine as hearts and flowers, with chocolates on the side; but Valentine's is a story of great courage and political protest, of sitting in jail and giving his life in service to a love that offers true life and lasting freedom. If you read February's *Zion Herald* (page 11), then you know that Valentine stood against the Emperor, Claudius the Cruel, who used his office and his power to pursue profit and gain through the wars he waged, banning marriage for the sole purpose of using ever more men as soldiers with even fewer distractions in life. Valentine thought the law was cruel, and stood against it, inviting imprisonment and then death. Our elementary schools love to lift up Valentine as the patron saint of *storge*. M-TV offers more than its share of tributes to the insatiable desires of *eros*,

but Valentine's is a story about safeguarding the dignity of men and women, who are not to be used solely as a means to someone else's madness, but as children of a loving God, destined to grow into lives that learn the true meaning of love, God's love, *agape*, the love that was embodied in Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and seen in the sacrificial self-giving of true friends and fellow servants like Valentine. His is a day to remember and a story to tell so that others might learn about a love that changed the world, a love that can change our lives, as we learn the difference between the many kinds of love that delight and attract (like *storge* and *eros*), and loves that teach us about lasting friendship (*philos*) and the community of extended family we have in Christ (*agape*). These are the loves that we celebrate with Valentine's Day, loves that are ours as we strive to live ... in Jesus' name. Amen

WHAT'S IN THE NAME BEHIND SAINT VALENTINE'S DAY

Valentine lived in Rome during the third century. At that time, Rome was ruled by an emperor named Claudius, whose nickname was Claudius the Cruel. Here's why. Claudius wanted to have a big army. He expected men to volunteer to join. Many men tired of leaving their wives and families to fight in wars. As you might have guessed, not many men signed up. This made Claudius furious. So what happened? He had a crazy idea. He thought that if men were not married, they wouldn't mind joining the army. So Claudius decided not to allow any more marriages. Young people thought his new law was cruel. Valentine thought it was preposterous, and he chose not to support that law!

Valentine was a pastor in the church. One of his favorite activities was presiding at marriage services. Even after Emperor Claudius passed his law, he kept on performing marriage ceremonies — secretly, of course. Imagine a small candlelit room with only the bride and groom and the priest. All were committed to whispering the words of the ceremony, listening all the while for the steps of soldiers. One night, the footsteps of soldiers approached. The couple escaped; but Valentine was caught, and thrown in jail with a punishment of death. As it turned out, wonderful things happened. Young people came to the jail to visit Valentine. They threw flowers and notes up to his window. They wanted him to know that they, too, believed in love.

One of those young people was the daughter of the prison guard. Her father allowed her to visit Valentine in the cell. Sometimes the two of them would sit and talk for hours. They lifted each other's spirits, and both agreed that Valentine did the right thing by ignoring the Emperor and going ahead with the secret marriages. His friend was blind, and over the course of many visits, God cured her of her blindness. When news of that miracle got out, Claudius the Cruel worried that news of Valentine's power might spread. So, he moved up the execution. On the day Valentine was to die, he left his friend a little note thanking her for her friendship and loyalty. It was signed, *from your Valentine*. It was this note that started the custom of exchanging love messages on Valentine's Day. This first Valentine was written on the day that Valentine died, February 14, one thousand, seven hundred and forty years ago. Now, every year on that day, people remember. But most importantly, they think about love and friendship. And when they think of Emperor Claudius, they remember how he tried to

stand in the way of love, and they laugh – because they know that love cannot be contained, constrained, or beaten, not God’s love for us, and not our love for one another!