

Newsletter reflections for February

When we look at various calendars for a year usually there is a theme which is represented by a picture or saying about each month. These seem to remain similar from year to year. January's calendar images are snow scenes, fireworks and New Year Celebrations, etc. January's themes seem to be about resolutions and good intentions for the coming year. When the page turns to February, the calendar images are often related to Valentine's Day with images of hearts and couples. The theme there seems to be about love and romantic relationships. It is a time that the National Heart Association launches its fund raising appeals. It is a time when advertisements for chocolates and diamonds seem to flood the media trying to spur retail purchases all in the name of love. Although February is the shortest month of the year, because of Valentine's Day's presence during the month it garner's a lot of retail attention. The items put on clearance from Christmas sales have not yet disappeared from the stores when the marketing for Valentine's Day cards, candy, decorations, etc. have appeared. But what almost no one stops to realize any more is that like Christmas, this day's recognition was begun as a religious observance. It began as Saint Valentines' Day to honor several early church saints named Valentineus. These men were martyred on February 14th during the 3rd century by a Roman Emperor as they witnessed to their faith in Christ. Exactly how this observance of the martyrdom of saints became connected to romance is unclear although it might be connected to the timing of a Roman pagan festival known as Lupercalia which was held from February 13th to 15th and involved matchmaking. The Catholic Church's commemoration of St. Valentines' Day began in the 5th century probably in an attempt to replace pagan rituals with festivals honoring Christian saints. Whatever the roots, the connection was made and St. Valentines' Day is now associated with love—sort of. And really, an association of love with Christianity is truly a very appropriate pairing. The Gospel of John can provide us with many verses to support that connection, but not necessarily in the way that it is currently being done. If you think about it, do pieces of candy hearts or even fine chocolates boxed in a red heart represent love? Or do even fine pieces of jewelry, items of gold or silver really seem like representations of love? How have we come to associate things given—no matter how costly—with love? Do objects really provide love or demonstrate love? It seems that everything around us now comes with an assessed value—including love. I think this connection between things used as expressions of value for those around us have created many of the problems which we face. There is another aspect to this theme of February—and that is the very nature of the meaning of love itself. It is one of the idiosyncrasies of language that words do not always translate simply from one language to another. In English the word love covers a wide range of meanings—you can sincerely use the word love to proclaim a deep emotion or a very shallow one—and more and more today—we use the shallowest of meanings for what we are saying—for the commitment we are making. As is frequently mentioned when speaking about the use of love by Paul in Corinthians, the Greeks had three different words which we reduce to the one word "love". The one we most often use seems to be found under what we would transliterate as *erotica*. That "love" was love of a romantic or sensual nature between human beings. And that seems to be the aspect that Valentines' Day emphasizes exclusively. But that is far from the only form of love that we can experience. In today's world that use comes casually and transiently. When that is the case, it often leaves both the speaker and the listener empty. The second form of love often described by the Greeks is that represented by the name Philadelphia which is known as the "City of Brotherly Love". "*Philo*" was the word Greeks used to describe non sensual love between human beings—love between family members—not just brothers, but all members of families. This type of love creates bonds and is capable of building relationships—bridges—relationships—ties—connections—communities. The third meaning

for the Greeks is what we call agape (ἀγάπη) love and is usually compared to the love of God or Christ for humanity. It is spoken of in terms of self-sacrifice, love that is described as giving. This form of love is considered the highest form of love and is called divine love, but human beings are also capable of demonstrating it. When we reach out to someone in kindness without thinking of our self first, then we have acted with agape love. When we choose to give up an unneeded item in order to make a donation or gift to someone else that is an act of agape love. Not all acts of agape love have to be done dramatically. Many are just those acts of providing the loving word to someone who is suffering. In the Hebrew Scriptures God's love is described as hessed—steadfast. Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament both also describe another type of love—the love of things; of possessions—idolatry. So when we hear all these mentions of love in media and in conversations during February, what types of love are we hearing of---romantic, brotherly, family, community, or love of things? What types of love should we be thinking of?

Shalom, Pastor Libby