

Newsletter Reflections for February

When thinking about the month of February the usual images revolve around flowers, candy, and cards with images of hearts and small flying beings with bows and arrows called cupid included. All of these images have already begun appearing, mostly on a background of bright red. The retail world has taken over the occasion rapidly filling any empty retail space since New Years with reminders of February 14th—Valentines Day, which these things symbolize. Originally this day had a religious association, a day set aside to honor a 3rd century Christian martyr. Although the history surrounding the individual saint honored is unclear. At least three separate attributions have been made; one to a Roman priest, one to a bishop and one to priest serving in Africa. In each case, supposedly the imprisoned saint wrote to the emperor on behalf of Christians signing the letter “Your Valentine”. Included was a drawing of a heart beneath the signature. How this came to be associated with “courtly love” and romance during the medieval period has several legends including an observation about the date and spring time mating practices of birds and other animals. However these traditions came into being, it sometimes puzzles me why we associate these symbols used at Valentine’s Day with love, at least anything but the most superficial possible meaning of the word. “Romantic love” is not usually one that has much staying power. Stories around romantic love usually have happy couple coming together, but they are not stories which are portrayed as continuing very long after that...the novel or movie then usually ends fairly soon after that. Thus the term “happy endings”, which is something we all seek in personal relationships. This use of the word “love” seriously undervalues what it is meant to be within human relationships. Early in Genesis (1:18) God observed about Adam that it was not good for “man” to be alone. God created us, in God’s own image. Although we do not understand the Trinity, the Godhead is not singular. Within the Trinity, there are relationships. God also created us--human beings to be in relationships. Love is the tie God created to bind us to God and to each other. Love is a word which often occurs within our scriptures, both the Hebrew Scriptures and Gospel accounts. The Hebrew Scriptures have constant references to God’s hesed—steadfast love. The gospels tell us of the agape love of Christ which led to the cross. In our scriptures love has nothing to do with flowers, candy, or anything at all easy or superficial. The love described in scriptures is vastly different. It endures forever. It considers others first. The love of God for God’s creation is beyond our ability to comprehend. It has endured beyond the mists of time before humanity had any means to convey it but through oral traditions. That love of God for human life has been demonstrated throughout history as God has acted through various men and women. People he has called, people who have not always been thrilled by the call and what it has meant in their lives. But the message given to those who were called to speak has always been to convey a love for people, a desire for people to be able to live well, to have what they needed, an intention for all the resources of the earth to provide so none should be oppressed or deprived. Because when our scriptures speak of God’s love, they also call us to respond with love. Again the response called for is not superficial. We are called to love God with all that we are; and to love other human beings in the same way. Those were what Jesus said summed all

the laws and teachings of the prophets when he was asked about the greatest commandment. Love is not shown with candy and flowers, but with respect and compassionate care. Many of the parables that Jesus used illustrated aspects of this (Good Samaritan, for example). Jesus' ministry in the countryside ignored all the accepted barriers and boundaries of his day. He tended and cared for all he encountered. If we want to consider February in terms of a time to celebrate love, perhaps we should think more about what our scripture tells us about it. The love we find in scriptures brings with it a beauty far beyond any prose written on cards or those heart-shaped candies. Scripture describes a love that is a gift from God. And the love between people which is based on the kind of love found in our scripture is love that binds us together in communities which care for one another and which reach out beyond our immediate and known neighbor to give care and respect to all because God's love encompasses all. It is also the kind of love we all want in our lives. As we listen to the news of the day, perhaps we should focus on February as a month where God's love and vision of love is celebrated instead of the hearts and flowers promoted by the world.

Shalom,

Pastor Libby