

Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church

Lake Worth, Florida

Celebrating Valentine's Day [February 11, 2006]

Canon Richard T. Nolan

“SAINT VALENTINE AND OTHER MYTHS ABOUT CHRISTIAN LOVE”

As the story goes,* it was a summer Sunday on a Manhattan subway car. The ten riders maintained New York City anonymity by not looking at anyone else or acknowledging their presence. Glances would be cast toward the advertising above the windows or the world passing by outside. Eye-to-eye contact would be too personal. At a stop, a young girl came aboard with a woman. Now twelve people seemed to be deep inside their own little worlds. At the next stop, with the doors open and the motor quiet, the little girl said clearly and loudly enough for all to hear, “Mommy, I love you.” Suddenly there were smiles on all faces; riders looked at each other in a new sense of community. They were drawn together because of the shared experience and expression of love. For a moment, total strangers were brought closer because of the power of love conveyed through the new glow in their faces. A valentine in action!

The *Summary of the Law*, which we heard in tonight's Reading from Matthew (see below), is one of my favorite scriptural passages; I probably quote it too often. “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” This declaration by Jesus is the moral absolute for all Christians, an absolute principle rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. By declaring, “on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets,” Jesus provides an indisputable, liberating *moral context* – a framework - for understanding all other commandments, rules, and ethical values – including the 613 religious regulations of his day. In so doing, he frees us from slavish conformity to lesser, inflexible, imprisoning moral codes and regulations that too often inhibit, or even prevent, love of God, neighbor, and oneself.

In the spirit of St. Valentine's Day we may ask, what basically *is* love among human beings? A psychotherapist colleague once told me that “love” is no more than our glandular-neurological responses activated in particular settings; we should just flow with our individual sense of love – as much as we can within the laws of the land. Others view love as a singular force, like an energy of affection in which we give and receive. Some others understand love as a constellation of various qualities that promote human well-being. In the Bible itself there are several understandings of love. Like so many words, *love* defies neat explanations, although within Christianity it always has a personal *I-Thou* rather than an impersonal *I-It* attribute.

With regard to love for others, in particular the neighbors closest to us, from Christ's example we can infer that each of us is to promote in personal ways the worth of those with whom we come into significant contact. A number of *mutual qualities* inherent in the love lived by Christ can guide us: appropriate self-disclosure; trust and empathy; deep, non-coercive involvement; compassion and patience; dependability and firmness – with yes's and no's; and, honesty and fairness. Additionally, Christian love is encouraging, and supportive; joyful, tender and vibrant; respectful and peaceable; sometimes tough and forceful – all blended with hope, mercy and forgiveness. No doubt, there are additional such qualities. Clearly, the intensity and responsibilities of Christian, “valentinian” love will vary, according to the actual relationships we have with particular individuals, such as our significant other(s), family, friends, associates, and other assorted communal bonds – including local Christian congregations.

Here is a true love story*: Sam Rayburn was Speaker of the House of Representatives and one of the most powerful politicians in U.S. history. On one occasion, Rayburn learned that the teenage daughter of one of his friends had died. The next morning Rayburn went to his friend's house. He said, “I just came by to see what I could do to help.” The friend thanked him for coming, but said that there was nothing that Rayburn could do. Rayburn asked, “Have you had your coffee this morning?” His friend said that he had not taken time for breakfast. Rayburn said, “I'll make you some coffee.” While Rayburn was setting up the coffeemaker, his friend came into the kitchen and said, “Mr. Speaker, I thought you were supposed to have breakfast at the White House this morning.” Rayburn said, “Well, I was, but I called the President and told

him I had a friend who was in trouble, and I couldn't come." Certainly, this is an act of love that is not distinctively Christian, but love nonetheless. Another valentine in action!

Some interpretations of Christian love might sound familiar and good, but they are not exemplified in Christ; in practice they often backfire or diminish people. As "myth," they may be humanly invented half-truths or errors, yet part of a historical Church-related ideology. One of these is unqualified selflessness or self-denial; although one might find oneself in circumstances where, for the sake of a beloved, one sets aside self-concern, Christ taught *love of oneself* as an overarching virtue. Surely, self-centeredness and self-absorption are always unloving traits, but literal selflessness and self-denial *as absolutes* contradict the healthy *equal* regard Christ taught. Regrettably, over the centuries significant degrees of cultivated martyrdom, self-neglect, and masochism, even contempt for oneself, have distorted our Lord's declaration to love one's neighbor *as oneself*. A tortured Good Friday gloom rather than an Easter joy seems to be the focus and experience of those distortions. Other misrepresentations of Christ's love have included an impersonal global love for everyone and everything as well as possessiveness and parasitic dependency; countless relationships have been ruined by the feelings of being owned or by leaning excessively on others. I must add that the various meanings of so-called "unconditional love" – whether on God's part or our own need clarification; otherwise, unconditional love remains a vague, perhaps quite unbiblical, and self-defeating myth. In examining Christian love throughout the ages, a mythology built on alien, unbiblical notions has invaded Christ's love that can make marriage, other commitments, friendships and family life a living hell.

During our less formal, twenty-minute supper discussion, we shall explore "loving oneself" further – especially the art of establishing appropriate buffers and boundaries while loving others and God.

For the moment, it is sufficient to say that we human beings love each other in a variety of ways. Moreover, our love, however Christ-like, is imperfect and impaired to one degree or another. At our best, strengthened by God's spirit, and by each other, we are slowly progressing toward mature love and full liberation in Christ. Nevertheless, there is nothing simple or easy about genuine Christian love. For instance, so often we forget that love of others requires mercy, when we feel a need to punish; compassion, when we feel anger; non-coercion, when we want control; moderation, when we crave victory.

You and I are in the process of becoming more fully human as the Creator intends us to be. As we purge "mythologies" from Christian love, our shared life as Christians becomes a more positive, applied art – though inexact, imprecise, always subjective and situational. By gathering here to worship, by sharing a degree of fellowship, the *process of becoming* is nurtured, so that, indeed, we *do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God*. Thereby, you and I live more truly within the Spirit of Christ's *Summary of the Law* - the best valentine anyone can receive.

*Source lost; story was in collection of notes used in preparation for this sermon.

Associated with the theme of love, "Saint Valentine" appears to refer to two Valentines, a Roman priest martyred about 269 and a bishop - also martyred. The available accounts might refer to only one actual person. What is more, St. Valentine might be pure myth; we just do not know for sure. The association of the day with courtship and romantic love may be connected with an ancient pagan festival, not with any notable tradition of a St. Valentine - which is among the reasons he is not officially commemorated by the Episcopal Church. In any case, St. Valentine's Day on February 14th has evolved to a celebration of various kinds of love for friends, family, teachers, and others. Hallmark Cards reports that only 30% of today's valentines have to do with romantic love.

A READING FROM THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

First, from Deuteronomy:

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.* You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Second, from Leviticus:

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

And third, from Micah:

‘With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

THE WORD OF THE LORD!

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THE GOSPEL: Matthew 22: 34-40

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”