

REAL LOVE IS MORE THAN HEARTS AND FLOWERS

Another Valentine's Day has passed, a holiday that some love, some dodge, some dread. But long before the perishable Valentine tokens of chocolates, greeting cards and flowers came into play, there lived the man for whom the day is named, with his distinctly unromantic story.

Valentine was a priest who ministered to 3rd Century Christians being persecuted under the Roman Emperor Claudius. Valentine was imprisoned for his work and ultimately executed for refusing to denounce his faith. He was buried on February 14, now known as Valentine's Day.

Legend has it that shortly before he was martyred he wrote a note to a young girl whose sight had been miraculously restored when he touched her eyes. He signed the note, "From your Valentine", which later seeded the custom of sending Valentine cards. If only emulating his selfless love for persecuted and afflicted people had bloomed into such a popular tradition as well!

But Valentine's tale is not the only love story to become distorted over the course of time. It also happened to one of the most famous love passages in the Bible. You have probably heard it read at weddings, where it is well-intended to instruct the bride and groom that "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is

not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

"Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a).

Those words are pure gold for two people embarking on the adventure of marriage, but that was not the original intent of the passage, which comes from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church he had established in Corinth a few years earlier.

Paul's practical explanation of love was not written to inspire starry-eyed newlyweds, but to remind the church how to lovingly resolve the internal problems and resist the external pressures that were threatening to disrupt their family of faith. It was not about romantic love, but about sacrificial love -- the kind embodied by Jesus.

The passage follows a portion of the letter in which Paul explains the stunning reality that the Church is the living Body of Christ, in which all the various parts are needed to continue Jesus' work on earth until he comes again. Each member's gifts must be exercised, all their personalities accommodated, all their weaknesses forgiven through the sacrificial love that binds the parts together in service to God and one another. So, all the things that Paul wrote "love is..." apply to all relationships, not just romantic ones.

Members of the Corinthian church failed to love well at times, and so do we. As author and pastor Scott Saul wrote in his

book *Befriend*, "Membership in a local church means joining your imperfect self to other imperfect selves to form an imperfect community that, through Jesus, embarks on a journey toward a better future together ... When we dismiss the local church, we dismiss and become destroyers of Jesus' first and foremost love."

Christians continue to come together as Jesus commanded, in admittedly imperfect church families, to keep learning how to "walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2). We come together regularly -- in person -- to worship God and to grow in the selfless love that Jesus exudes. Then, we live it out in the world like Valentine, not merely with a one-day token of love, but daily, with our very selves.

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux