

# **What is Jesus Doing?**

## **FACE OF LOVE**

Today is Superbowl Sunday. For those of you who are football fans, although you may not necessarily have a favorite team in this particular game, you will likely be thinking and talking about little else for the rest of the day. So, for that reason, let's talk now about the other special day that's coming up.

This Friday is the day we call Valentine's Day. In our current day and age, it's become a cute, funny kind of secular festival that we mark on February 14th as a celebration of romantic love. It's a strange time of year to celebrate it to be honest.

In the Middle Ages in Europe, Spring came a bit earlier than it does now, and apparently, it was around this time of year that people started to hear the mating songs of birds.

And as the trees began to bud and the flowers started to bloom, they thought it would be a good time to come out of their winter hibernation and start writing love letters to each other. In most of this country in February, we're still in the grip of winter but for some reason the springtime tradition persists.

We write love notes and send greeting cards, beginning as children in school, sharing little heart shaped candies with funny little phrases on them. As adults, we send flowers to our lovers and spouses. We go out for special dinners. We give gifts of chocolate and cute stuffed animals.

For many people, Valentine's Day is a celebration of romantic love focusing on those with whom we are in a relationship, or oftentimes, those with whom we hope to be in a relationship. We might even say to perfect strangers at the store, "Happy Valentine's Day", just like we say "Merry Christmas".

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It's easy to get cynical about Valentine's Day. You've probably heard the critiques... Valentine's Day is a holiday created by flower vendors, greeting-card companies and candy manufacturers. It's a commercial enterprise and nothing more. Certainly, there may be some truth in that.

According to the National Retail Federation, Americans spent \$23.9 billion on Valentine's Day last year. So why are we talking about it today? It doesn't really seem to have a place in Church, does it? As it happens, however, Valentine's Day does have some historical and Christian roots.

History records that Charles the Fifth, the Duke of Orléans, on February 14th in 1415, wrote the first Valentine poem to his teenaged wife while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London. He wrote that he was lovesick for her and in a poem, he called her his "very gentle Valentine."

Valentine's Day is actually named, however, after Valentinus, a Christian priest who lived in Rome in the 3rd Century. There are many stories about St. Valentine, as he came to be known. At the time of Valentine's life, many Romans were converting to Christianity, but the Emperor Claudius II was a pagan and created strict laws about what Christians were and were not allowed to do. Apparently, marrying people to each other was one of those things they were NOT allowed to do.

Claudius also believed that Roman soldiers should be completely devoted to military service to Rome and therefore passed a law preventing them from marrying at all. In defiance of Claudius edict, Valentine began to marry these soldiers in secret Christian ceremonies, and this was the beginning of his reputation for believing in the importance of love.

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Eventually, Valentine was caught and jailed for his crimes. While imprisoned, Valentine cared for his fellow prisoners and also his jailor's blind daughter. Legend has it that Valentine cured the girl's blindness and that his final act before being executed was to write her a love message signed 'from your Valentine'. Valentine was beheaded for his miraculous acts of healing and his powerful witness to Christ on February 14th of the year 270 AD. You won't hear about that on a Valentine's Day card. Can you imagine?

*Roses are red,  
violets are blue,  
Valentine lost his head,  
but I hope never you...?*

No, for most of the world, Valentine's Day has been all hearts and bunnies, chocolates and warm fuzzy feelings. And that's why it feels out of place in church. Because church is supposed to be a place where we tell the whole truth about God and the world. Here, we don't flinch from the hard realities of sin and death. Here, we proclaim God's love and our freedom because of the empty tomb, but not without the pain of the cross.

We who follow Jesus know that love is much more than what is acknowledged on this one day by the world. Love is what we are called to acknowledge every day. Love is patience and kindness and gentleness. Love is also commitment and endurance, suffering and self-sacrifice.

The Apostle Paul gives us the ultimate depiction of God-like love in his first letter to the Corinthian Church.

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*Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.*

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Paul's description of the action and behavior produced by love is distinctly counter-cultural. Love is the ultimate expression of the upside-down Kingdom of Heaven that we are supposed to be bringing to earth.

Paul was speaking against the envy, pride, and self-centeredness of the Corinthian culture to early Christians who were still struggling with those very things, and in doing he speaks clearly to our own geography and generation as well.

In a society where so much is presented in terms of "self"—self-awareness, self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-image, self-righteousness, self-realization—to present a way of existence in which a person lives for others in a life of loving self-sacrifice will always be counter cultural.

For each of us, following the One who gave His life as a sacrifice for sin will always be humbling and may be costly in terms of human recognition and progress in life as secular society defines it. For us, Christ must ever remain our true example of love.

The envy, boasting, rudeness, arrogance, and anger of normal life must be turned upside down intentionally. Instead, patience and humility and a rejoicing in the truth needs to be the Hallmark of God's people.

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Our lives are Christ's Greeting Card. His message of love that He desires to give to the world around us. One of the ways we do that is to show love to those who have not shown love to us. As Jesus told us, we are to love even our enemies. In keeping with the way Christ forgave our sin and no longer holds it against us, so our love should hold no record of other people's wrongs against us.

How forgiving is God towards us?

*As far as the east is from the west, The distance between the east and the West is infinite.*

- Psalm 103:12

That is how deep, how broad, how wide, and how high our forgiveness is meant to be for those who have wronged us. Let's face it. This is one of the ways in which we Christians often fail to bring God Glory in our dealings with other people. We might say we forgive but then still allow the hurt or pain of something that was said or done to us to linger in the back of our minds.

Then, the next time we encounter the person we supposedly have forgiven...we might allow ourselves the indulgence of bringing that old resentment to the forefront of our minds, keeping score of their wrongs. Then, if something goes wrong again in the relationship, we may once again say "I forgive you," but we might then add the word "BUT," and then that one word will, as Pink Floyd once said... "put another brick in the wall".

It is then that we need to be reminded of Peter's question to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew about how often to forgive our brother when he sins against us.

*Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"*

- Matthew 18:21

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The answer Jesus gives is, in essence, that the life of love for a disciple is best lived as a forgiving life. Disciples of Christ will go on and on forgiving not because that is what we are told to do but because it is who we are. More specifically, it is because of who we have become in Christ Jesus. Our love is supposed to be God's love.

The Apostle Paul said this to the Church at Ephesus...

*Therefore, be imitators of God as dear children.*

- Ephesians 5:1

We are asked to imitate the steadfast love that God embodies throughout the Bible as a child models his parent character.

David describes the steadfast love of God this way...

*The Lord is gracious and full of compassion,*

*Slow to anger and great in mercy.*

- Psalm 145:8

God's love is a tender, compassionate love that is merciful but also fiercely truthful. Just and zealous for righteousness, yet never giving up on His beloved children no matter how many times they stray.

We see this balance of God's love in mercy and righteousness over and over in the Bible. A great example is the Prophet Elijah.

It was love for God's righteousness that brought him into confrontation with the ruling authorities of Israel when they fell into idolatry. It was love and the passion for truth and justice that gripped Elijah and would not let him go as He called Israel back to right relationship with God and brought down the fire from Heaven.

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It was the compassionate love of God the Father that gave Elijah the miraculous power that enabled him to raise the son of the Widow of Zarephath from the dead.

And it was God's love that sent Elijah ravens to carry him food in the desert, and was the still small voice that came to him when he was alone and afraid, calling him gently back to community and giving him purpose when he had given up on people. It was God's love that endowed his life with purpose and took him alive to be with Him in a fiery chariot at the end.

It was the same love that compelled Saul of Tarsus to renounce his former ways of violence toward the early church to follow the crucified and risen One as the Apostle Paul. Paul had had a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus and simply put, he fell in love.

For this love he was ready to abandon all and follow the Source of all Love who had revealed Himself to him. For the sake of this love, Paul proclaimed a gospel of grace to the nations of the known world, a gospel he was willing to suffer and die for.

It was Paul who said...

*For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*

- 2 Corinthians 4:6

The face of Jesus Christ is the face of love, as witnessed by Peter, James, and John on the mount of Transfiguration. In a dazzling vision of glory, they saw Moses and Elijah—representing the Law and the Prophets, the whole Word of God—pointing to Jesus. There, they heard the same Voice that had spoken at Jesus baptism naming him the Beloved One.

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Jesus, in His words tells us the whole of the Law:

*Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'*

- Matthew 22:37

And in his deeds, He shows us the message of the Prophets:

*And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*

- Matthew 22:39

For God, it has always been, and is all and always and only about love. Now for us it is all and always and only about love. Not only the sweet and innocent teasing love of children on Valentine's day... or the yearning romantic love of couples on a special date, but the mature love of the disciple that is willing to suffer and die for our beloved, for Jesus.

Ours is a passionate, powerful, sacrificial love that can move heaven and earth closer together. Jesus shows us God's love that will not even stop at death to rescue and redeem a lost humanity. We are here to tell the story of that love and show the world what that love looks like.

Another note from the History books... Jerome of Stridon, the 4th Century Priest and translator of the New Testament scrolls, told this story about John the Beloved...

He wrote...

"The blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age. His disciples could barely carry him to church and he could not muster the voice to speak many words. During individual gatherings he usually said nothing but, "Little children, love one another."



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“The disciples and brothers in attendance, annoyed because they always heard the same words, finally said, “Teacher, why do you always say this?” He replied with a line worthy of John : “Because it is the Lord’s commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient.”

So the world is going to go on being the world and celebrate its own version of love this Valentine’s Day. Children will be giving each other furtive glances and passing around hard candy hearts with cute little phrases saying “Be my Valentine”. Grownups will be buying each other extravagant gifts and going out for overpriced Valentine’s Day themed dinners.

But for us, this one day that is focused on the word love should remind us that we are to be focused perpetually on the real love, God’s love, the love of Christ.

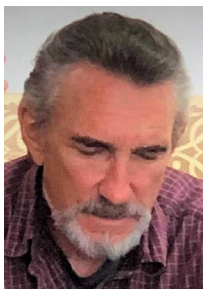
Let’s conclude this conversation with the Apostle Paul’s last word on the subject, picking up where we left off in his letter to the Corinthian Church, and to all believers, for all time.

Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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*Let's Pray,*

*- John Henry Raskin, Roadhouse Rabbi*