St Valentine’s Day Sermon

Text: Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

St. Valentine was a Priest, martyred in 269 at Rome and was buried on the Flaminian Way. He is the Patron Saint of bee keepers, engaged couples, epilepsy, fainting, greetings, happy marriages, love, lovers, plague, travelers, young people. He is represented in pictures with birds and roses. This is all that is officially known about St.Valentine.

However there are a number of legends that scholars say may have some oral history validity but are most likely creations of the Chaucer circle in the medieval period.

I particularly like this one because it shows an ancient attempt to limit marriage; something that proposition 8 has tried to do in California. It is said that whenever we legislate against human nature it is doomed to failure. This is what Claudius tried to do in the St Valentines legend.

Here is the legend:

There was a priest by the name of Valentine. He lived in Rome about 250 AD. At that time, Rome was ruled by an emperor by the name of Claudius the second. Claudius wanted a big army. He thought men should volunteer to join. Many men just did not want to fight in wars. They did not want to leave their wives and girlfriends. So, not many men signed up
to fight. This made Claudius angry. He had an idea that if men were not married, they would not mind joining his army. So Claudius decided not to allow any more marriages.

Young people thought his new law was really cruel. Valentine thought it was ridiculous.

After Emperor Claudius passed his law, Valentine kept on performing marriage ceremonies – but secretly. He would whisper the words of the ceremony, while listening for soldiers on the steps outside. One night, he did hear footsteps. The couple he was marrying escaped, but he was caught. He was thrown in jail and told that his punishment was death. St. Valentine tried to stay cheerful. Many young people came to the jail to visit him. They threw flowers and notes up to his window. They wanted him to know that they, too, believed in love. One of these young people was the daughter of the prison guard. She was blind and hard of hearing. Her father allowed her to visit him in his cell. Valentine prayed for her healing and her sight and hearing were restored. They often sat and talked for hours. She believed he did the right thing by ignoring the Emperor and performing marriage ceremonies. On the day he was to die Valentine left her a note thanking her for her friendship and loyalty. He signed it, "Love from your Valentine."

Today the whole world remembers Valentine, and Claudius? He is forgotten, covered over by the sands of time as proposition 8 soon will be, because one cannot legislate against human nature and expect to succeed. Claudius had to learn that legislating against love is why his legislation failed. And as we know here in California love rightly demands equality before the law.

Romantic love can be a huge challenge for us. All of us start off with fantasies and dreams and hopes when we are young. Being in love can be the most exciting time of our life. But how many of us have fallen in love and then had our hearts broken? As Robert Bridges once wrote: “When we first met we did not guess that love would prove so hard a master... who could tell that sore distress, this irretrievable disaster, when we first met, we did not guess that love would prove so hard a master.”
There are some of us that have managed to get beyond the heartache and have been healed by humor. As Pat Patel writes:

About a year had passed since my amicable divorce, and I decided it was time to start dating again. Unsure how to begin, I thought I'd scan the personals column of my local newspaper. I came across three men who seemed like they'd be promising candidates. A couple of days later, I was checking my answering machine and discovered a message from my ex-husband. "I was over visiting the kids yesterday," he said. "While I was there I happened to notice you had circled some ads in the paper. Don't bother calling the guy in the second column. I can tell you right now it won't work out. That guy is me."

When I read Facebook from time to time I see the word ‘complicated’ and it is always referring to relationships and usually it involves romantic love. Why is romantic love so difficult? Because it is complicated! Mixed in with romantic love are lust, sex, fantasies, and infatuations. Is there a way through this tangle? I believe there is. It is found in a single word RESPECT.

True romantic love always involves full respect for ourselves and for the loved person. When respect goes the tangle comes back. With respect in the driver’s seat all the passengers are happy and life becomes a lot less complicated.

All successful relationships involve the two way street of respect. Respect builds trust and hope and love and joy and thus stability in relationships. In order to receive respect we have to give respect.

Sometimes after we have fallen in love and been hurt badly we find ourselves either on the rebound or unwilling to try again.

Rebounds need caution because the chances are good that we are not really in love with the person but desperately seeking validation and an end to the loneliness. This is where the self respect must click in. For in order to be ready to love anyone else properly we need to first love ourselves. This
principle is so fundamental it is found in all the major religions. Love the neighbor as the self.

When we respect ourselves but are afraid to risk it is important to keep putting the love out there. The old saw says “Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.” There is truth to that but it has a flaw. If you have loved it is never lost in the eternal scheme of things. Love is not so much the response it gets back as the joy of giving love. The only way we lose is when we withhold love.

Alan Cohen writes in a chapter Dare to Love Boldly: “As I observe the lives of happy people, I see they all have one thing in common: they have chosen to keep on giving love. They do not let outer circumstances dictate whether or not they will keep their hearts open. And daily we will find greater strength of heart as we are willing to take love’s hand and let its gentle guidance illuminate our path. Never stop loving. It is our only salvation and our only hope of finding true peace.”

We began this sermon with a text from 1 John in the New Testament. This jewel is in the center of a passage but is the crown in terms of insight. What is God really like? Is God someone who punishes us when we mess up? Does God ever stop Loving us?

Think about that little son or daughter you have. When they are in danger say climbing a tree do you say well John your report card from school was a disaster so we will need to work on your spelling before I rescue you? When they fall down the stairs and start to bleed do you wait to do anything because they left their room in a mess? Of course you don’t! Why? Because your love for them won’t allow it. You are quick to rescue your children and do the right thing because you have learned to love them. We are God’s children and loved infinitely. Why do we fear?

What is God really like according to St John? St John says:

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”
In other words the essence of God is love, so when we do not love, we have left God out of the picture. The other very powerful truth I want you to notice in this passage is that if we love, we already know God whether we realize it or not for everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. So knowing God is not a matter of being part of any religion at all- it is about loving and if we are loving we know God who is love. It is that simple and that beautiful!

You see what St John is talking about is that our origin is in Divine love.
And what kind of love is that?

In the Christina tradition there is solid teaching that the love of God is the highest love of all- unconditional love. Check out the parable of the Prodigal son and the way his father loves him. Instead of pouring condemnation over the son the father welcomes him home, puts the robe of honor on him and the ring of authority and holds a feast for him. The son did not earn this! It was a free gift of unconditional love. It is Grace! That is what God is like!!argues Jesus.

St Paul argues for the same love in 1 Corinthians 13, that famous love chapter read at so many romantic weddings. The word St Paul uses in the Greek is ‘Agape’ a love that makes a decision to love regardless.

Now I want to argue that Romantic love when deeply understood as respect also includes unconditional love. Marriages and relationships that really sing hold a mutual unconditional love for the partner. This is something that all of us can strive for but it is in essence a decision to love regardless of the circumstances. If both partners decide to love each other unconditionally then we have long lasting and really beautiful relationships. If not then not.

I once owned a black poodle we called Limoge. Whenever I came home she loved me from the moment I came in to the moment I left. If I scolded her
she still tried to wag her tail. She was always full of joy, she was always glad to see me. Even if I was too busy she would greet me with great affection. She was always an example to me of unconditional love. This I suggest is the way that we humans need to love one another. When we mess up we are still there for each other. As St Paul says: Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous, love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence and it is not resentful. This kind of love takes no pleasure in other people’s difficulties but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.

This kind of love is the key to the secret of happiness in relationships. If it is mutual and shared it is a pearl beyond price. It is also the essence of the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus taught his followers about.

It is at its heart a healing love.

I close with a beautiful story for Valentines day- a story of unconditional love!

**Catherine Moore writes this true story**

Four days after his sixty-seventh birthday, my father had a heart attack. He was lucky; he survived.

But something inside Dad died. His zest for life was gone. He obstinately refused to follow doctor's orders. Suggestions and offers of help were turned aside with sarcasm and insults. The number of visitors thinned, then finally stopped altogether. Dad was left alone.

My husband, Dick, and I asked Dad to come live with us on our small farm. We hoped the fresh air and rustic atmosphere would help him adjust. Within a week after he moved in, I regretted the invitation. It seemed nothing was satisfactory. He criticized everything I did. Alarmed, my husband Dick sought out our pastor and explained the situation. At the close of each session the pastor prayed, asking God to soothe Dad's troubled mind. But the months wore on and God appeared to be silent. Something had to be done.
I sat down with the phone book and methodically called each of the mental health clinics listed in the Yellow Pages. I explained my problem to each of the sympathetic voices that answered. In vain. Just when I was giving up hope, one of the voices suddenly exclaimed, 'I just read something that might help you! Let me go get the article.' I listened as she read. The article described a remarkable study done at a nursing home. All of the patients were under treatment for chronic depression. Yet their attitudes had improved dramatically when they were given responsibility for a dog.

I drove to the animal shelter that afternoon. After I filled out a questionnaire, a uniformed officer led me to the kennels. Each pen contained five to seven dogs. Long-haired dogs, curly-haired dogs, black dogs, spotted dogs all jumped up, trying to reach me. I studied each one but rejected one after the other for various reasons: too big, too small, too much hair. As I neared the last pen a dog in the shadows of the far corner struggled to his feet, walked to the front of the run and sat down. It was a pointer, one of the dog world's aristocrats. But this was a caricature of the breed. Years had etched his face and muzzle with shades of gray. His hipbones jutted out in lopsided triangles. But it was his eyes that caught and held my attention. Calm and clear, they beheld me unwaveringly.

I pointed to the dog. 'Can you tell me about him?' The officer looked, then shook his head in puzzlement.

'He's a funny one. Appeared out of nowhere and sat in front of the gate. We brought him in, figuring someone would be right down to claim him. That was two weeks ago and we've heard nothing. His time is up tomorrow.' He gestured helplessly.

As the words sank in I turned to the man in horror. 'You mean you're going to kill him?'

'Ma'am,' he said gently, 'that's our policy. We don't have room for every unclaimed dog.'

I looked at the pointer again. The calm brown eyes awaited my decision. 'I'll take him,' I said.
I drove home with the dog on the front seat beside me. When I reached the house I honked the horn twice. I was helping my prize out of the car when Dad shuffled onto the front porch.

'Ta-da! Look what I got for you, Dad!' I said excitedly.

Dad looked, then wrinkled his face in disgust. 'If I had wanted a dog I would have gotten one. And I would have picked out a better specimen than that bag of bones. Keep it! I don't want it' Dad waved his arm scornfully and turned back toward the house.

Anger rose inside me. It squeezed together my throat muscles and pounded into my temples.

'You'd better get used to him, Dad. He's staying!' Dad ignored me. 'Did you hear me, Dad?' I screamed. At those words Dad whirled angrily, his hands clenched at his sides, his eyes narrowed and blazing with hate.

We stood glaring at each other like duelists, when suddenly the pointer pulled free from my grasp. He wobbled toward my dad and sat down in front of him. Then slowly, carefully, he raised his paw.

Dad's lower jaw trembled as he stared at the uplifted paw. Confusion replaced the anger in his eyes. The pointer waited patiently. Then Dad was on his knees hugging the dog.

It was the beginning of a warm and intimate friendship. Dad named the pointer Cheyenne. Together he and Cheyenne spent long hours walking down dusty lanes together. They spent reflective moments on the banks of streams, angling for tasty trout. They even started to attend Sunday services together, Dad sitting in a pew and Cheyenne lying quietly at his feet.

Dad and Cheyenne were inseparable throughout the next three years. Dad's bitterness faded, and he and Cheyenne made many friends. Then late one night I was startled to feel Cheyenne's cold nose burrowing through our bed covers. He had never before come into our bedroom at night. I woke Dick, put on my robe and ran into my father's room. Dad lay in his bed, his face serene. But his spirit had left quietly sometime during the night.
Two days later my shock and grief deepened when I discovered Cheyenne lying dead beside Dad's bed. I wrapped his still form in the rag rug he had slept on. As Dick and I buried him near a favorite fishing hole, I silently thanked the dog for the help he had given me in restoring Dad's peace of mind.

The morning of Dad's funeral dawned overcast and dreary. This day looks like the way I feel, I thought, as I walked down the aisle to the pews reserved for family. I was surprised to see the many friends Dad and Cheyenne had made filling the church.

For me, the past dropped into place, completing a puzzle that I had not seen before: the sympathetic voice that had just read the right article ...

Cheyenne's unexpected appearance at the animal shelter. . .his calm acceptance and complete devotion to my father and the proximity of their deaths. And suddenly I understood. I knew that God had answered my prayers after all.

Catherine Moore says: “Life is too short for drama and petty things, so laugh hard, love truly and forgive quickly. Tell the people you love that you love them, at every opportunity.”

St Valentine would agree!