

VALENTINE LOVE

A Sermon by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life
Stanford Memorial Church, University Public Worship
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Saint Valentine's Day, coming up in three days now, isn't what it used to be. It began in commemoration of a third century Christian priest who was martyred in Rome. By the Middle Ages, Saint Valentine had become associated with the union of lovers under conditions of stress. By the twentieth century his holiday was being celebrated by the widespread exchange of romantic little messages called valentines. The modern Roman church must not have been pleased with this evolution of the holy day, because in 1969 Saint Valentine's feast was dropped from the liturgical calendar.ⁱ

Perhaps one way of thinking about this evolution is to say that Saint Valentine's Day began as a commemoration of spiritual love, later became a celebration of committed interpersonal love, and has lately become a rather commercialized carnival of romantic love. Not that I personally have anything against romantic love, I should hasten to add. When I officiate at weddings or gay union services I often describe romantic love as a great gift, but I then go on to explain that it's not a sufficient foundation for a strong, devoted partnership. What I'd like to do with you now is to think about love between two human beings in relation to these three dimensions: romanticism, committed partnership, and spiritual love.

Let's start with romantic love -- the Romeo and Juliet variety. The Song of Solomon in the Hebrew Bible does a pretty good job of describing the feelings of two people who have fallen,

hopelessly, head-over-heels, in love with each other: "You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride; you have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. How sweet is your love,...how much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! Your lips distill nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue." The recipient of these sentiments then speaks: "My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven... His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh. His arms are rounded gold, set with jewels. His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires. His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold...He is altogether desirable." The narrator then adds: "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."

Now what do you notice as the qualities of this romantic love? Very physical. All about arms and legs, lips and tongues, hair and eyes. All about bodies, and all about overwhelming desire. It's powerful; it's wonderful; there's nothing like it. I'll never forget my first romantic experiences as filling up every thinking and feeling moment of the day and night...as incredibly exciting...as blissful.

Yet, there are some major downsides to romantic love. There's the pain of not being able to be with a lover in an all-fulfilling way all of the time. That pain reaches its extreme form in Romeo and Juliet, when each of the lovers takes his or her own life when each thinks the other is dead. Romantic love also tends to be objectifying of the other -- physically focused on the body of the other and on the desire for sexual gratification. It exists largely in fantasy-land, either never being consummated or slipping away as real familiarity with the other person grows.

Many social scientists have described romantic love as essentially narcissism. What one loves is not the other, but one's own image of the other. One loves one's own projection of what an ideal lover should be, which ultimately bears little resemblance to the actual person to whom affections are directed. In Jungian psychological terms, one loves the image of one's own anima or animus which is projected onto the other person. Romantic lovers also tend to love the state of "being in love" as much or more than the actual object of love. One becomes lost in one's own daydreams, sexual fantasies, romantic feelings, and aspects of the chase, like making oneself as attractive as possible (and then despairing about one's physical deficiencies, sometimes to the point of anorexia and bulimia).

So what does more mature, committed interpersonal love look like? Author and Stanford alumna bell hooks was on campus a week and a half ago speaking about her most recent book, Salvation, about black people and love. She also referred to her prior book, called All About Love: New Visions. She's very insightful, as I'm sure many of you know, and she writes about mutuality as being the heart of love. "The essence of true love is mutual recognition -- two individuals seeing each other as they really are," she explains. "We all know that the usual approach is to meet someone we like and put our best self forward, or even at times a false self, one we believe will be more appealing to the person we want to attract. When our real self appears in its entirety, when the good behavior becomes too much to maintain or the masks are taken away, disappointment comes."ⁱⁱ

In true love, mutual love, "individuals usually feel in touch with each other's core identity. Embarking on such a relationship is frightening precisely because we feel there is no place to hide.

We are known."ⁱⁱⁱ There is also a dynamic dimension to this kind of love, as each person gets to know herself or himself better, as well as coming to know the other more deeply. Honesty and openness are critical, as is the commitment to put mutuality of relationship ahead of power -- ahead of any attempt to control the other.^{iv}

Mutual love is not something that we fall into, or that falls into our laps. After the giddiness and sliding on the slippery slope of romantic love, mutual love requires practice, discipline, devotion, commitment. The compassionate, empathetic listening to the other that's required takes energy, especially when it triggers one's own feelings of powerlessness, helplessness and vulnerability. Therefore hooks counsels making time for those conversations when we're not bone weary, irritable, or preoccupied. But we must practice making time for them.^v

The rewards are great: the courage to face reality, to embrace our true self and that of our partner, and then to grow and change together through our mutual emotional vulnerability. As hooks puts it, "We can only move from perfect passion to perfect love when the illusions pass and we are able to use the energy and intensity generated by intense, overwhelming, erotic bonding to heighten self-discovery."^{vi} When that self-discovery is linked with openness and empathetic listening to the other, partners grow and change together. Then in the best sense "To love fully and deeply puts us at risk. When we love we are changed utterly."^{vii} As Catholic monk Thomas Merton asserted: "Love affects more than our thinking and our behavior toward those we love. It transforms our entire life. Genuine love is a personal revolution. Love takes your ideas, your desires, and your actions and welds them together in one experience and one living reality which is a new you."^{viii}

This gets us close to the next dimension -- spiritual love. Here I'm referring to spiritual love between two partners and not directly to love of God. In my twenty-five year career in the ministry, there have been many, many times when couples have asked me to read from the thirteenth chapter of the Apostle Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians as they are united for life: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing." This kind of spiritual love at its core is giving and forgiving. Giving generously to one's partner means recognizing when the other person needs our attention and responding. It means freely sharing our time, skills and resources, only to find that by giving in this way we receive manyfold. Perhaps the greatest gift we can give, though, at the spiritual level is forgiveness. "Love is kind...it is not irritable or resentful."

Many years ago a Harvard classics professor named Erich Segal wrote a sentimental little novel called "Love Story." It became a best seller and was turned into a high-grossing Paramount film starring Ali McGraw and Ryan O'Neal. It began with the line, "What can you say about a 25-year old girl who died?" Perhaps its most famous line, however, was "Love means never having to say you're sorry." I've always felt Erich Segal got it half-right but then profoundly wrong. I'd say instead: "Spiritual love means always being able to forgive the other when he or she genuinely says "I'm sorry." In the movie, preppy Oliver Barrett IV marries a woman from the other side of the tracks, Jennifer Cavallari, soon after they graduate from Harvard and Radcliffe. Oliver's successful, wealthy and distant father doesn't approve of the marriage, and he cuts Oliver off financially as he is beginning to attend Harvard Law School. Jennifer works hard

to put Oliver through law school. Then near the end of the three years his father tries to initiate a reconciliation by sending his son and daughter-in-law an invitation to his sixtieth birthday. Oliver refuses to go and makes Jenny do the dirty work of calling his father to say no. Then he becomes enraged at Jenny when she adds this comment to Oliver's father over the phone: "You know, in his own way your son loves you very much." When Oliver later apologizes to Jenny for his hard-heartedness, she speaks the famous line, "Love means never having to say you're sorry." By the end of the movie, though, it becomes clear that Oliver hasn't gotten the spiritual point of Jennifer's capacity to forgive. Jenny dies of cancer and Oliver's father drives to the hospital, finds Oliver, and again tries to affect a reconciliation by telling Oliver how sorry he is. Oliver then uses the famous line like a bludgeon: After saying, "Love means never having to say you're sorry," Oliver walks away from his father and the movie ends. In Oliver's hands the line becomes a condemnation of his father for supposedly never having loved him. Otherwise, why would his father have to say he was sorry? And Oliver's resentment triumphs over the spiritual capacity for loving forgiveness he should have learned from his wife Jenny.

Ultimately we're all imperfect beings. The Christian message is one of divine forgiveness and reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ. Spiritual love between partners, from the perspective of the Christian tradition, is one that has repentance and forgiveness at its core. Beyond that lies the willingness to give totally of oneself to the other, even unto death. As Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." The highest level of spiritual love may then be saintly love, exemplified in Saint Valentine's martyrdom for his unstinting love of Christ. My Valentine love message this morning has been pitched a bit lower than saintly

love, however. It can be summarized this way: If you're interested at this time in your life, give valentines joyfully this year, but don't stop at romantic love. If you have a partner, try to practice mutual love, which involves a discipline of openness and honesty, empathetic listening, personal vulnerability, and willingness to change. Then work on developing spiritual love -- love which is freely giving and forgiving. Perhaps Saint Valentine's Day can again be what it once was meant to be.

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- i. Judith S. Levey and Agnes Greenhall (eds.), The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia (New York, Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 743, 884.
 - ii. bell hooks, All About Love: New Visions (New York: Perennial, 2001), pp. 183-184.
 - iii. Ibid., p. 184.
 - iv. Ibid., pp. 152.
 - v. Ibid., p. 158.
 - vi. Ibid., p. 179.
 - vii. Ibid., p. 187.
 - viii. Ibid., pp. 187-188.