

Devotion – Week of February 13, 2022

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

As I write this, today is Valentine's Day. The Atlanta Journal Constitution reported that 58 million pounds of chocolate are sold during a typical Valentine's Day week. Jim and I have done our part by contributing 1 pound each to the chocolate economy. This holiday goes back for centuries. The first writing we find about it is a story that Chaucer wrote in 1375 stating that all birds and humans seek mates on February 14. The first valentine recorded is from Charles, Duke of Orleans, to his wife in 1415, while he was being held prisoner in the Tower of London.

I am reminded on this day of a story Jim told the children at Rock Spring Presbyterian Church years ago, when our youngest daughter was small. He sat down on the chancel steps with about 15 children the Sunday before Valentine's Day and asked them if they knew what holiday was coming up. They all answered, "Valentine's Day." Jim looked astonished, and said, "No it's not. It's Halloween. See – I even have a pumpkin." He pulled this small pumpkin from behind him and showed them. Well, they were just totally shocked at his ignorance and quickly began correcting him. With a grin, he finally said, "Well, let me see if we can find a heart in this pumpkin so we can celebrate the right holiday." So he turned it around and gently pulled out the heart he had carved. And then he told them the origin of this day – the story of St. Valentine.

There are multiple stories, and multiple Valentines, who were Catholic bishops martyred in the third century under Roman Emperor Claudius II, known as "Claudius the Cruel." The most well-known story is about the Roman Bishop Valentine who resisted Claudius' decree that no soldiers could be married, because he thought unmarried men made better soldiers. (They perhaps did, since they didn't have to worry about leaving widows and orphans behind if they died.) Valentine thought this was unfair, so he performed secret weddings. In order "to remind these men of their vows and God's love, Saint Valentine is said to have cut hearts from parchment," giving them to these persecuted Christians, a possible origin of the widespread use of hearts on St. Valentine's Day. He was finally caught and sentenced to death. While he was imprisoned in the home of a noble, he healed the blindness of the noble's daughter. Before he was beheaded on February 14, 270 A.D., he wrote a goodbye note to the girl, signing it, "your Valentine."

The early church proclaimed him a saint because of his healing and named February 14 as St. Valentine's Day. The word "Valentine" means strong, worthy, powerful. But on this day, we remember the tenderness of love expressed toward our spouses and loved ones. I am reminded of Psalm 100:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.
Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever,
And his faithfulness to all generations.

May you have a week surrounded by the love of God and family. And hopefully, some chocolate.

Jeanne