

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Exploring different kinds of love at Valentine's Day

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Love God and love your neighbor. This is often called the Great Commandment, but what does it have to do with Valentine's Day?

The holiday also is called St. Valentine's Day, which gives a hint to its origin as a religious feast day in honor of St. Valentine, who lived in the third century and died Feb. 14 as a martyr. Tradition has it that he was performing marriages between young Christians to escape conscription, during a time when Christians were persecuted by Emperor Claudius II. There was no evidence that the Feast of St. Valentine had any connection to romantic celebrations until one of Geoffrey Chaucer's poems in the 14th century made a reference to the day as a day when humans (and birds) sought a mate.

Love has so many meanings both in religion and in common parlance. We talk about loving God and loving neighbor. But we also say we love football, love spaghetti and loved last evening's sunset. When I say I love my wife, it doesn't have the same implication as when I say I love my parents, or my sister or my teacher.

The Greeks had many different words to distinguish these various kinds of love.

- ▶ Storge (family love) describes the kind of love that parents have for their children or love between siblings. It might also extend to grandchildren, cousins or in-laws.
- ▶ Philia (friendship love) can apply to anyone. I might affirm that I love everybody in my community or my school.
- ▶ Eros (romantic or passionate love) doesn't always involve sexual activity. It might refer to strong attraction, to falling in love or to being in love.
- ▶ Ludus (playful love) is loving to dance, loving music, loving golf or loving to walk on the beach. When young children enjoy playing together, we call them "play-mates."
- ▶ Pragma (abiding love) is a deep mature closeness that develops over time that involves patience, tolerance of another's faults and willingness to forgive. For couples, it is often apparent as their relationship matures and draws them even closer together.
- ▶ Philautia (healthy self-love) involves liking and respecting oneself. It is out of such self-respect that one can love another person. It is the opposite of an unhealthy narcissism.
- ▶ Agape (unconditional love) goes beyond the other forms of love and is all-

embracing. It is selfless and altruistic. It is often used for the love God has for us and as the model for how our love for God should be.

Nearly all religions have love as a central component of their writings and message. Many religions have different terms for the various forms of love. The commandments to love God and love your neighbor, and even the stranger, are clear in the Hebrew Scripture. Jesus identifies these commandments when asked what is the greatest commandment. Other traditions emphasize compassion and love and often have special terms to identify the unconditional love from God, which we are to emulate.

In contemporary times, we heard the call for the power of love in the statement by Martin Luther King Jr. "We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way."

More recently, the presiding bishop of the American Episcopal Church, Bishop Michael Curry, delivered the sermon at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. For hundreds at St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle and for millions watching on television, Curry preached the power of love, saying:

"Oh there's power, power in love. Not just in its romantic forms, but any form, any shape of love. There's a certain sense in which when you are loved, and you know it, when someone cares for you, and you know it, when you love and you show it — it actually feels right."

He continued, quoting the Christian Scripture, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God. Those who do not love do not know God. Why? For God is love." (1 John 4:7)

Curry saw the power of love as "healing when nothing else can," liberating, and showing us the way to live. He continued, "Love is not selfish and self-centered. Love can be sacrificial, and in so doing, becomes redemptive. And that way of unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love changes lives, and it can change this world."

He called on all to imagine a world where love is the way. What would our homes, families, communities, governments and nations be like where love is the way?

"When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteous-



Michigan's first "LOVE" sculpture from artist Robert Indiana was unveiled in May 2018 on Louis Campau Promenade in downtown Grand Rapids. What does it mean to love God and love your neighbor? *MLive.com files*

ness, like an ever-flowing brook.

"When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the Earth will be a sanctuary.

"When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the river-side, to study war no more."

Curry referred to the French Catholic priest, scientist, author and mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who saw love as the energy that drives all development and activity. Fire was, according to de Chardin, one of the greatest discoveries in human history. He believed that if humanity could ever harness the energy of love, "it will be the second time in history that we have discovered fire."

Curry concluded his message by referring again to King: "Dr. King was right: we must discover love — the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world, a new world."

While our society celebrates this commercial season called Valentine's Day, let us go much further to the many forms of love and to the redemptive power of love to make "a new world."

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*Martin Luther King Jr.*