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2/01/2018 | Monthly Topic, Relationships

## Falling in love with me

by Rozella Haydée White

**I am totally, completely and passionately in love with me. Yes, you read that correctly. I don't just love myself. I am IN LOVE with myself.**

This July marks six years since my divorce. It simultaneously feels like it wasn't that long ago and like it was a lifetime ago. I am not the person who I was when I divorced my ex-husband. I am not the person I was when I was married. And I am definitely not the person I was when I met my ex-husband.

Many people of Christian faith recite the greatest commandment but leave off something – and it's what I think is the most important part!

Recall, in the Bible, someone asks Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment?" He replies with not only the greatest commandment, but the second commandment as well. And we don't often hear—let alone follow—that second commandment in its entirety.

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:36-39).

### You shall love your neighbor as yourself

Jesus doesn't simply say love your neighbor. Jesus says, "love your neighbor as you love yourself." If we don't love ourselves, how can we claim to love our neighbor as we love ourselves?

It's been a long journey for me to come to terms with this, to come to terms with the fact that I was

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trying to live out the greatest commandments without loving myself. How many of us actually do love ourselves?

I recently asked friends if they love themselves. One said, "Well, I don't hate myself."

This gave me pause. There's a big difference between not hating yourself and actually loving yourself. Many of us go through life simply tolerating ourselves, barely being patient with ourselves and beating ourselves up when we don't live up to internal and external expectations. We don't take the time to get to know ourselves, often cluttering our time and space with things that distract us from our inner thoughts, feelings and hopes.

I've decided that I don't want to simply tolerate myself, I want to love this woman who is me deeply and passionately. I want to discover the things that make me uniquely me. I want to do things for myself that I enjoy. I want to take care of myself—mind, body, heart and soul—so that I can live my best life. I want to practice forgiveness with myself and lavish grace upon my very being. I want to love myself without hesitation, so I can better love others.

So many of us exist merely to survive. We don't exist to thrive. We live to get through each day, and truth be told, sometimes it's hard for us to get through each moment. We convince ourselves that we don't deserve the same joy or love that others do. We spend our time focused on others, and if we are being honest with ourselves, we do this so we don't have to focus on the sh\*t of our own lives. How many of us really believe what writer Brené Brown said: "[We] are imperfect and [we] are wired for struggle, [yet we] are still worthy of love and belonging."

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## Making lists

Last year my best friend and I decided to switch things up. We've spent so much time over the years listing what we wanted in a mate! (Tell me you haven't done that, too.) Our lists have evolved as we've grown up, of course. Anyway, rather than rewriting our lists for the hundredth time, we decided to write lists of how we hoped to be loved – what things someone who truly loved us would express and embody that love. And then we took it a step further.

We challenged each other to do these things for ourselves, rather than waiting for someone else to do it for us. The question we asked ourselves was: What would it look like to love myself the way I want to be loved by another? My answers included the following:

- Be emotionally supportive
- Be intellectually stimulating
- Be passionate
- Be affirming and be my biggest cheerleader
- Be physically connected
- Be truthful
- Be joyful
- Be spiritually supportive
- Engage in meaningful quality time
- Go on adventures

For so many years, I have made loving myself someone else's job, instead of taking on this holy task myself. Now, however, I have entered a chapter of my life where this work is my singular focus. In

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every moment, I am committed to the practice of loving myself.

Some days are better than others. Some moments I have to remind myself that I am worthy of deep, abiding love. But here's what I've learned: the more love I lavish on myself, the more love I have to share with others.

I think this is what Jesus intended when he said to love others as we love ourselves. Jesus knew that love multiplies. It does not diminish. It always finds a way and the more we nurture it, the more we have to give.

### **Discussion questions:**

1. Why is falling in love with ourselves so difficult?
2. How might God be calling you to love yourself more fully?
3. What does it look like for you to love yourself as you would want another to love you?
4. Where in your life have you seen love multiply?

### **Closing prayer:**

Creator God, you have created us out of love and designed us for love – love of ourselves, of others and of you. Help us to love the divine creation within each of us – to honor it, care for it and love it unapologetically. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

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02/01/2018 | Faith Reflections, Relationships

## Valentine's Day: Beyond the hearts and flowers

*by Angie Shannon*

During my grade-school years, the bulletin boards were covered with red cupid silhouettes announcing Valentine's Day. I took great care in selecting boxed Valentines for my classmates, addressing each tiny envelope in anticipation of the big day. In retrospect, it occurs to me that we had the kind of parents and teachers who made sure we had enough Valentines so that no child would feel unloved on that day.

Fast-forward to college, I attended Valparaiso University where Valentine's Day was more like a season; it started the day we returned to campus from Christmas break. Women who did not get that much hoped-for engagement ring at Christmas looked forward to Valentine's Day to make up for it.

There were women who were okay about not having a significant other. I recall there were women without partners whose pain felt palpable. Come this Valentine's Day, dorm and office lobbies will be full of fragrant flowers, beautiful cards, stuffed animals and chocolates professing sentiments of ardent "like" if not love.

So, what is a single young woman do this Valentine's Day? Gather a bunch of your girlfriends and watch "Waiting to Exhale" and be the sour sisters?

Buy your own box of chocolates and bemoan your miserable state? Sidestep Valentine's Day altogether by pretending the day does not exist? Get self-righteous, then console yourself and share a toast of "Hate-orade" with the green-eyed monster?

### **A more excellent way**

Sadly, many of us know women like these. If we are honest, at one time some of us have been those



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women. Yet, as women in Christ, we know that God provides some perspective on our singlehood if we but listen. As Apostle Paul reminds us, there is a “more excellent way.” The way of excellence is love (1 Corinthians 12:31). Scripture tells us that God is Love. Because God created us and we bear the likeness and image of Divine Love. Whether we are partnered or single, we are lovers!

Naturally, we become frustrated when we are unable to love in a partnered relationship. Out of frustration, one of the biggest mistakes a woman can make is settling for a significant other who is less than loving. I have seen more than one beautiful, talented, intelligent young woman's self esteem give way to the society's white noise that says: “You are not good enough.”

There is no good outcome when we are in bad relationships other than to exit them—immediately! Know with every fiber of your being that God loves you and as Christina Aguilera says, “You're beautiful.”

Confidence in God's love leads us to make better choices. A loving and right relationship is a foreshadowing of what God's infinite love is really like. A right relationship is based admiration and respect.

### **The realities of dating today**

I have read many books by Christian relationship and dating experts. They tend to tout the glories of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31:10. There is nothing wrong with being the woman so described, but the implicit message is “let the man find you.” Then they tell you to become the kind of person you would want to be in relationship with.

Before you run out and join a Zumba class, take up ceramics, and get a makeover, take a moment for prayer and self-reflection. Without a sense of who you are—that is God's Beloved—you will end up as a virtuous fashionable, good-looking, physically fit, and interesting woman—but still single. It is an understatement to say, that dating and courtship rituals have changed since the writing of Proverbs. They've changed rapidly with the advent of on-line dating, speed dating, and reality shows featuring single men and women. This is not to devalue what the writer of Proverbs says about the virtuous woman. But how do we read Proverbs while Beyonce's “All the Single Ladies” is blasting from our mp3 players? Today the church must address the realities of dating today.

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I consulted with Alan Roger Currie, international dating expert and author of the book *Mode One* about male-female relationships. He consults mostly with men about interpersonal communication in dating. He says that a healthy sense of self-esteem is foundational when dating. That self-esteem coupled with the ability to be real or authentic in articulating your wants, needs, and desires is your strong foundation. Are you looking for a relationship somewhere along the spectrum between friendship and marriage? Are you looking for a friend to enjoy social events? Are you looking for a long-term relationship?

Be very honest with yourself. Envision the kind of relationship you want. Consult with God in prayer.

I have advised women of all ages to pray that God guides you to the person that is best for you both. This is no exercise in daydreaming. This is a practical exercise in identifying what is essential to you.

### **Not about flowers and candy**

Whip out pen and paper and “get to getting!” Is kindness a non-negotiable? Write it down. Respect? Intelligence? Write that down too. Is smoking a deal-breaker? On the list it goes. Your list is not a recipe for the perfect partner. Even the happiest of couples will tell you that person does not exist. The point is to be aware of your wants, needs, and desires. As you seek a partner, you will be better able to celebrate things you hold in common and identify the things that intrigue you both. It may be that God surprises you. My cousin prayed for a man that would “take her breath away.” Her first date with the man that became her husband ended abruptly because his cologne was so pungent that it literally took her breath away! God has a sense of humor!

### **Rooted in love**

Valentine's Day will come and go but as women of faith, we stand securely and confidently knowing that our self-esteem is not tied up in flowers and candy; it is rooted in God's love that is sure and unending. Whether you are single or partnered, it is time to celebrate Valentine's Day in broad expansive ways. After all, love is multifaceted. We have huge webs of relationships as sisters, friends, mothers, aunts, cousins, godmothers, nieces, coworkers, church-members, and more. Reclaim the day to practice love in all its expressions.

Take time on Valentine's Day to share God's love in acts of service, kindness, and generosity. Give

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blood that week. While not as romantic as a candlelight dinner, it is life giving! Buy carnations and take them to a local nursing home. It will bring a smile to many faces. Make and write a heartfelt sentiment to a loved one that you have not seen in a great while.

Decide to heal a broken friendship. Pamper yourself and enjoy the company of friends, male and female.

Know that God loves and affirms you. God's love for you is limitless unbound by space, time or present circumstance. This love endures and will carry you through the whole of your life.

### Discussion questions

1. Imagine a healthy relationship with a significant other. What does it look like? Describe examples of healthy relationships in you have seen or experienced. Have you found yourself embittered over relationships or not having one? How did you get over the anger?
2. We often hear parts of 1 Corinthians 12:31–13:12 read at weddings. How does this text speak to you as a way of excellence?
3. Scripture reminds us “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). Reflect on the ways in which God strengthens, affirms and calls you as beloved.

*The Rev. Angie Shannon is a single ELCA pastor who will celebrate this Valentine's Day in acts of loving service and enjoying friends.*

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02/01/2018 | Advocacy, Monthly Topic

## How to have a fair trade date

by Emily Davila

**When I was a kid, my mom would put Valentine's Day presents on the breakfast table before we left for school. We might get a little Whitman's candy sampler and some lip gloss, or perhaps something unrelated, like a pair of socks or a plastic lizard.**

Now, as an adult, I'm still trying to figure out the right way to celebrate this day with my husband. One year, I made dinner reservations at a fancy restaurant, but it felt too forced and kind of clichéd. The next year, I made a last-minute raid on the grim selections left at the drugstore. Last year, I made a card out of magazine pictures, but my husband just thought I was being a cheapskate. So I am approaching the day again with some dread.

According to the National Retail Federation, people spent \$18.2 billion on Valentine's Day last year. Consumers plan to spend an average \$85.21 on their significant other/spouse.

All this suggests that love and romance are thriving, and that people are literally investing in their relationships. And although I am ultimately just another one of the millions of consumers spending money on Valentine's Day, I am also focused on the social justice aspects of two of this holiday's classics: chocolate and roses.

### Not-so-sweet chocolate

Seventy percent of the world's cocoa is grown in the war-torn region of West Africa, where the industry thrives on child labor and the profits fuel violence. An estimated 284,000 children work in West Africa, 200,000 of them in Ivory Coast. Unfortunately, market forces are only increasing the demand

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for cocoa and thus for child labor. Sometimes children work alongside their parents and still attend school, but many do not.

While industry giants drag their feet on ensuring that their cocoa is not produced by child labor, demand for fair-trade certified chocolate is growing, and the industry is learning valuable lessons from the success of fair-trade coffee. At a fair trade-certified cocoa cooperative, child labor is prohibited and the farming methods used are better for the environment. Additionally, these co-ops are independently monitored and are expected to make contributions back to the community. Fair trade chocolate still makes up less than 1 percent of the \$13 billion chocolate market, but sales and profits are growing rapidly, and the certification makes a real impact on farmer's lives. It can mean the difference between being able to send a child to school or not.

I plan to sit back on Valentine's Day evening and savor some fair-trade certified dark chocolate. My Valentine's Day consumer consciousness is not over though: Flowers, another wonderful, ephemeral expression of love, come with a downside too.

### **A rose is a rose is . . . toxic and carbon emitting?**

When a dozen long-stemmed red roses arrive at my office, for the moment I am giddy and excited. But later I can't help but think about the fossil fuels that were burned to transport them all the way from South America. I keep that thought to myself because I don't want to offend my husband, who thoughtfully surfed the Internet, entered his credit card number at an online flower shop, and pressed send. I'm lucky that my husband thinks to send me flowers, but wouldn't it be wonderful if instead of going to his computer, he'd walk to a local florist with an organic greenhouse using only the fossil fuel of the rubber on his shoes.

Most people don't realize that flowers, just like vegetables, are best bought from local, organic sources. More than 70 percent of cut flowers sold in the United States are grown in South America, where besides contributing to carbon emissions, they are grown with pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides that are restricted in the U.S. because they are highly toxic to workers. Flowers from South America are also infused with preservatives to keep them from rotting during shipment. An estimated two-thirds of Colombian and Ecuadorian flower workers suffer work-related health problems, ranging from stillbirths and miscarriages to impaired vision and neurological problems, according to the

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International Labor Rights Fund.

U.S. farming practices may be better, but some U.S. farms still use pesticides and fertilizers that contaminate ground water and streams, which can have a harmful effect on wildlife and human health. And the pesticides don't stop at the farm: The toxins from those flowers may be released into the air you breathe in your home.

But there are options. Ask your florist for local or organic choices, or perhaps go for a potted plant.

Fortunately, love itself is free of global trade and market forces. There are unlimited ways to show someone that you love them; just be creative. I hope that some additional eco-consciousness is just the creative boost you need.

Have a local, organic, fair trade V-day every day!

1. Ask your date to commit to volunteering for a cause you both care about.
2. Write a love poem.
3. Stay in. Set aside an evening for you and your date to hang out and talk. Drink wine (responsibly) and enjoy your time together. If your "date" consists of getting together with your best girlfriends, do the same thing.
4. Bake a fair-trade cake. Go to the Divine Chocolate Web site for cake recipes.
6. Use fair trade to tell the story. Whether you bake cupcakes with fair-trade certified cocoa for your co-workers, book club, or date, use the opportunity to talk about how fair trade is improving the lives of families and communities around the world.

Whatever way you choose to express your love this Valentine's Day, don't overlook simple gestures like spending time together or giving a hand-written card. As a consumer, don't forget to share what you know about fair trade with others while doing your part to buy fairly traded goods.

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Valentine's Day is once a year, but affirming your relationships with yourself and others can be celebrated every day.

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