

All You Need Is... (February 2018)

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By Rev Paul Graham

We've left behind Christmas, with the birth of Christ, the visits of shepherds and Magi all vying for our attention amidst the excesses of feasts both edible and televisual. We may even have finished our last turkey curry...

We now lurch unceremoniously into the hinterland of winter, those grey soulless days that never seem to get going or those occasional bright sunny days where frost glistens on every unheated surface. We've left 2017 behind and we're well and truly in the New Year, even if we still have to think twice when writing the date.

And as we arrive in February, we see trumpeted about us from most shop windows the strange annual phenomenon that is Valentine's Day. Strange in that we have just left a season of goodwill when we remember the greatest gift of love, only to be told that the best demonstration of love is to be found in one-off gifts that may or may not be just the one thing their recipient wants.

Not that I mind Valentine's Day. It's just that I'm unconvinced that real love should be limited to a mere 24-hour period at the end of the second week of the second month. What happens when you're feeling ill, or separated from your loved one or even not in a relationship? Shock and horror that any of this might be true...

And anyway, aren't we getting the wrong idea about love if we think that it can be measured by confectionary, jewellery or a romantic spa break? "Well, actually, Paul..." I can almost hear some of you saying, but maybe you just need to stick with me on this.

Love is a verb, as the 90's Christian band DC Talk sang, which means that we show love by our actions. But doesn't this justify the giving of flowers, cards and other Valentine-related ephemera? Not really, because it's not only about what we do, but to whom and why.

And again, this for me shows up a limitation of Valentine's Day. Essentially Valentine's Day reduces us to the simplest of mathematical formulae: one plus one equals the perfect romantic match. Our Valentine's world contains a population of two to the exclusion of all else.

But it doesn't have to be like that. When I was much younger, there was a bit of a trend in my school of sending Valentine's cards to lots of different people. This wasn't because of some lax moral code that we operated by, but rather as a sign of affection and friendship that included many, both boys and girls. In fact, as a grotty eleven year old whose view of girls placed them somewhere in the same category as unpleasant things found in dark corners of damp attics, I sent more cards to lads who shared my love for football, Lego, Doctor Who and Star Wars than to those who I considered weren't as much fun. Oh, how little I knew...

Though I didn't realise it at the time and definitely wouldn't have been able to identify the subtlety of the language, this was a lesson in love, of inclusivity that reached out and embraced others not as mushy romantics but as friends. As an example of how to subvert Valentine's Day, I think it's quite a good one. Rather than focussing on "that special someone" we are drawn into the wider world of people who have a place in our hearts.

Of course, the Bible beat us to it: of the four Greek words that can be translated "love" we regularly read

about two of them in the New Testament. We don't read about *eros*, the romantic, sexual love as promoted by Valentine's Day or *storge*, the type of love shared between parent and offspring. However we read plenty of times about *philio* (friendship) and *agape* (unconditional love).

Certainly those cards that I sent out to my fellow footballers and sci-fi addicts were in the *philio* category and even verged on the *agape* at times; I never wanted much out of them except to be passed the ball occasionally.

So what I'm suggesting here is that we might like to approach Valentine's Day in the same way that the Bible approaches love. Yes, if you read Song of Songs you will find plenty about *eros* love (and King David gives his own testimony about the pitfalls of loving based purely on this) and in our way of addressing God as "Father" we embrace some of the *storge* aspects of love. But we read far more about the *philio* and *agape* love shared between Christ and his disciples and within the fledgling church, though oftentimes they fell short, just to show that there's nothing new under the sun.

This means that we can, literally in some cases, have our cake and eat it. We can immerse ourselves in the lovey-dovey mushiness of Valentine's Day, satisfying our need for *eros* love. But we can also tick off the other three.

We can give it a go to show *storge* love, whether we've got children or not. We can show it in our attitude to others, our willingness to guide or to be guided.

We can also give it a go to show *philio* and *agape* love. Rather than write that one card, why not write several to those who mean a lot to you? I don't want to be overly morbid, but I do think it's a shame that we usually have to wait for the obituary notices to find out how much people are appreciated, even loved. Maybe we could demonstrate our *philio* and *agape* love to those around us, those who may or may not receive a dozen red roses or somebody's last Rolo.

After all, Jesus did say that's how people will know that we're his disciples (John 13:34-35).