

**THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY February 11, 14 & 15, 2004**  
**St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI**

**LOVED! WE LOVE. Colossians 3:12-14**

When you hear the date, “December 25<sup>th</sup>”, what do you think of? (Christmas) When you hear “March 17<sup>th</sup>” what comes to mind? (St. Patrick’s Day). When you hear “April 11<sup>th</sup>” what does that remind you of? (Probably nothing. It is the date of Easter for this year.) How about February 14<sup>th</sup>? What does that date remind you of? (Valentine’s Day) Valentine’s day has an interesting history. For 800 years prior to the establishment of Valentine’s Day in the 400’s, the Romans had a pagan celebration in mid-February commemorating young men’s rite of passage. This celebration featured a lottery where young men would draw the names of teenage girls from a box and that person would become the young man’s sexual partner for the rest of the year. In an effort to stop this immoral practice the bishop of Rome, Pope Gelasius ordered a change in the lottery. Instead of the names of young women, the box contained the names of saints. Both men and women drew names from the box and they were to try and emulate the ways of the saint whose name they had drawn from the box. Instead of the pagan god, Lupercus, a god of fertility, the church looked for a suitable patron saint of love to name this day. The saint the church found was Valentine. In 270 AD the Roman Emperor Claudius had beheaded him. Claudius had determined that married men did not make good soldiers, so he banned marriage in the empire. Valentine would secretly marry young men and women who came to him. When Claudius found this out, he tried to convert Valentine to paganism and Valentine attempted to convert Claudius to Christianity. When he failed, Claudius had Valentine stoned and beheaded. While he was in prison Valentine fell in love with the blind daughter of the jailer. Before he was taken to his death he sent his beloved a farewell message and signed it “From your Valentine”. As the years passed the lottery for women was banned by the church, but young men still sought the affection of young women and began to give the ones they admired handwritten messages of affection containing Valentine’s name.

This week we celebrate Valentine’s Day and we turn our thoughts and attention to the topic of love. As we do so the Word of God before us today speaks to this very subject. As we consider the Apostle Paul’s words to the Christians in Colosse, I would like you to consider with me this thought: **LOVED! WE LOVE!** Paul reminds us of a very important truth that you and I need to take with us everyday of our lives – **I) We Are Loved!** This love that God has for us has changed our lives dramatically. Paul tells us **II) We Love.**

**WE ARE LOVED!**

Do you feel loved? Maybe not. There are times when we may feel that we are deeply loved and cared for and there are times when we feel that no one cares, no one knows and no one loves us. But no matter how you and I may feel, the truth is: We are deeply loved. Listen to what Paul writes, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved.” (V12a) You and I have been chosen by God. Isn’t that amazing? Why would anyone choose me? When we look at ourselves and we compare ourselves to the standard that God has set for people – a standard of holiness and perfection, we don’t measure up. We are not perfect and yet we have a holy and righteous God who demands that we, his people, be perfect and holy. Then why on earth would he choose us? In fact, what is this choosing or election for? Right now in our country we are in the midst of a presidential primary election and people are choosing the candidate that they like and whom they would like to see as the president of our country. People make that selection on the basis of what the candidate says and promises and even on how he looks. What has God chosen us for? He has chosen us to be his children and to live with him forever in his heavenly kingdom. Now what was the basis for God electing you and me to be his children and to spend eternal life with him in heaven? The Bible tells us, “In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will.” (Ephesians 1:5) It had nothing to do with us. It was simply God’s great love and mercy that caused him to choose us.

Not only have we been chosen, but also Paul tells us that we are holy. I thought you just said that we were sinful and imperfect? We are. Yet God has declared us holy and righteous. When God looks on us, his chosen children, he does not see our sins and imperfection. Rather he sees the perfection and holiness of Jesus Christ, which cover us. Jesus demonstrated the greatest act of love for us when he came to this world. As our Savior once said, "Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) Jesus willingly laid down his life not just for his friends, but for the entire human race, people who hated him, despised him and rejected him. Jesus died for those people too. He died for all. And he rose from the dead to announce to us that we have been declared innocent. When we were baptized, God clothed us in the perfection of Jesus Christ. As followers of Jesus who trust in him as our Savior and God, we are holy in God's sight.

Why has God done all this? Was there something in you and me that caused him to elect us and to declare us righteous and holy? Absolutely nothing. It was his love. It is his amazing grace. The Bible tells us that God is love and that love is evident in all his actions and his personal dealings with each of us. Are you loved? You certainly are. Just look at the life of Jesus Christ. Consider who he is, God and Man in one person. Consider what he did for you – lived a perfect life, suffered the hell you deserve for your sins, rose from the dead conquering your last enemy death. Consider the fact that God gave you the faith to trust and rely on him. That is love. You are dearly loved and treasured by your heavenly Father.

## **WE LOVE**

When someone loves you, it changes your life. Look how human love and care affects us. We are told that infants, if they are not held and cuddled and are just left in their cribs, but fed and changed, do not flourish and grow, but regress and do not develop well. But the tender love and care that is shown them by their parents has a dramatic effect on their lives. The same is true for the love that God has for us. It changes our lives. As the Apostle John wrote, "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

Paul now encourages each of us to love and he tells us how that love is shown. He writes, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." (v. 12b) Did you notice that Paul is not talking about feelings, but actions and attitudes? We put on heartfelt compassion. We reach out to those who are hurting and are in need. We don't look at someone and pass by and not try and help. It is natural for a Christian to want to help and do something because we care. That's what love is all about. Another attribute is kindness and gentleness. We try and do good to others and we are courteous. Recently I read a letter to Miss Manners that was rather sad and disturbing. A woman wrote in about going to an opera performance. She complained that the couple sitting in front of her and her young friend had talked through the entire first act. She stared at them, but it didn't do too much good since they were sitting in front of her. She cleared her throat and tried to do some other things to get them to stop talking. Nothing worked. Finally during the intermission after the first act, she made the comment to her young friend that she was happy that his parents had trained him so that he knew how to behave during an opera. At the next intermission the man in front of her got up and began an argument and was very insulted by her comments. She asked him to please stop and said she would call for an usher. At that he lurched for her and grabbed her around the throat. An usher was called and the man was thrown out of the theater. This obviously was not a kind and gentle person. Think of all the road rage you read about and at times see while driving. We are not becoming a kinder and gentler society. In fact, just the opposite is happening. The love of most is growing cold and wickedness, rudeness and unkindness are increasing. Paul also encourages us to put on humility. We don't blow ourselves up and consider ourselves better than others. When that happens, then we don't treat people with respect and kindness. Paul also speaks about patience. We bear with others and we put up with a lot of things. That's how God treats us. As Peter wrote, "God is patient with us not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

Then Paul hits what I believe is one of the most important things that we need to practice in our lives as followers of Jesus Christ, forgiveness. He writes, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (v. 13) Too many of us carry around hurts that others have caused in our lives and we don't let go of them. We want to get even. We want to make others

pay for the hurts that they have caused in our lives. God says, “It is mine to avenge. I will repay.” (Romans 12:19) We are to forgive just as God has forgiven us. Our God does not keep a daily record of all the good we have failed to do and all the wrongs we have done and then throw it up in our face at the end of the day. He does not remind us of our sins. He forgives them. He covers over them and totally forgets them. As God treats us, we are to treat each other in the same manner. Forgive as you have been forgiven.

Paul now concludes with this statement, “Over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (v. 14) Those virtues that Paul encourages you and me to put on in our lives are what love is all about. It is about our attitude and our actions, not our feelings. As we celebrate Valentine’s Day this year, may we rejoice in the love that God has showered upon us and shown to each of us individually and may he empower us to love others as much as we love ourselves.

Amen.