

For better *and* worse
By Bishop Paul V. Marshall
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Valentines will soon be given with smiles and received with blushes. Many women and not a few men await the day their spouses will confess their deepest feelings for them, hoping they can make that single moment last for twelve months.

Some will be profoundly disappointed when that does not happen, but right there we find the essence of real love.

Starter love is infatuation, the idealization of the partner, and the denial of all that love costs. Consumerist love calls it off when love is costly or inconvenient.

Worthwhile love does cost. To love someone is to be vulnerable to them. Vulnerability produces a fear or resentment many deny, preferring to live with the idealized image – until it crumbles.

To love someone is to respect the fact that they will remain to some extent a mystery, ultimately unknowable, even after years.

To love someone is to surrender the dream of controlling them, surrendering what are sometimes entirely legitimate expectations for the sake of the relationship.

Finally, to love someone is to commit to a person with imperfections, some of which will cause deep and abiding pain; some people choose to live in denial of that reality and think that true love has left them behind.

The depth of love comes when we manage to embrace two truths. The beloved is indeed our prized person, occupying a special throne in our hearts. The beloved is also a source of vulnerability, pain, and therefore possible resentment.

When we can keep all of these factors in healthy tension, we know the depth of love. It really isn't "for better *or* worse;" it's "for better *and* worse." When we can embrace the one who gives us delight and agony, we are lovers indeed.

Similarly, the claim that "God is love" makes more sense when we understand love as the ability to embrace the other even when they disappoint and cause pain.

The Hebrew prophets, particularly Hosea, portray God as not able to walk away from the beloved who damages the relationship. St. Paul reminded early Christians that "while we were yet sinners, God loved us." God's love embraces us totally, not conditionally.

It's a life-long task to internalize that truth.

Another thought is even more challenging. From our point of view, God sometimes disappoints us. That has to be acknowledged. Life is often difficult, even tragic. Jewish spirituality has something to teach Christians here: part of the journey of faith includes putting up with a deity who does not seem to play by the rules he is said to have laid down. Loving a God who sometimes seems to us an underachiever is not a small thing.

At the same time, those who love God know what Job means when he says, “Even if he slay me, yet will I love him.” Those whose spirituality has been touched by even the briefest taste of ecstasy stay in the relationship despite the fact that God, like any beloved Other, is finally unknowable, uncontrollable.

Whether with the prophets we see God’s own suffering in relationship with Israel, or with the apostles we see on the cross God’s suffering in relation to the entire human race, something about a holiday marked by images of hearts shot through with arrows touches us deeply.

Beyond the candy and the canoodling, our celebration of romantic love this month reminds us that mature spirituality and mature love are much alike, each embracing an Other who is a source of both pain and great joy.

[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at www.diobeth.org.]