



February 1, 2024

Saint Valentine: Letters from Prison

In the New England Conference, Valentine's Day, Feb. 14, is when the annual Statistical Reports are due. This year it also happens to be Ash Wednesday, the solemn doorway to the season of Lent.

Also, undoubtedly, on Feb. 14, love is in the air with red hearts, chocolates, and roses. This celebration of romantic love has become an enormous commercial enterprise. But, like many of our cherished holidays, Valentine's Day harkens back to religious beginnings.

Saint Valentine, whose feast day is Feb. 14, was either a priest or a bishop in the early church and was martyred during the reign of Emperor Claudius II around the year 270. There are many legends associated with this holy man, the main one being his incarceration prior to his execution during which he befriended the jailor's blind daughter and sent her a letter with his signature that read, "from your Valentine."

Other legends give him credit for miraculously healing the jailor's daughter and secretly performing wedding ceremonies for soldiers to spare them from military duty. He was killed for the faith (either beaten with clubs or beheaded), and it is possible that there may have been more than one martyr by the name of Valentine. Likely the early church celebrated St. Valentine's Day as a substitute for the Roman pagan holiday Lupercalia, promoting health and fertility. Valentine's Day took hold in the 14th century as a festival of love and romance and has continued as such.

Knowing Saint Valentine's story, perhaps Valentine's Day can also be a day for us to consider ministry with those in prison.

Prison ministry is one of the mission priorities mentioned in the parable of the sheep and the goats. Jesus said to the virtuous sheep, "I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you visited me, **I was in prison, and you came to me.**" (Matthew 25:35-36) Our churches tend to focus on the first five.



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St. Valentine's letter writing from prison can be one inspiration for us. We can write letters of encouragement to the incarcerated. We can go further, and volunteer to teach Bible studies and minister to families of those in prison. Every church could be doing some kind of outreach, but it is largely missing from our programs.

There are some efforts happening in our Conference through [Kairos Prison Ministry](#). This program provides Christian-based retreats that are conducted in a prison for 72-hours. There are also "Kairos Outside" weekends that have the same format, and they minister to families of the incarcerated.

There is [Angel Tree](#), which provides Christmas gifts for the children of inmates, and there are numerous letter-writing projects sponsored by many faith communities. What's in your area? The need is great; the lives of those in prison and their families are marked by significant stigma and poverty. Loving outreach can make a difference in the lives of these folks, many of whom are your neighbors.

Prison advocacy is also a vitally important ministry. This is the harder work of speaking up for humane prison conditions, improved services for inmates with disabilities and mental health challenges, and access to programs and resources to help returning citizens. Your voice can make a difference as lawmakers consider budgets and policies. Learn about the issues in your state and write letters of advocacy.

Let's not forget the larger issue of who is in prison in the first place. Our voice is needed to call out the inequities created by racism, poverty, and classism.

According to the Criminal Justice System statistics, there are 5 million people in this country under some kind of supervision and nearly 2 million are in state or federal prisons or local jails. In 2021 the percentage of incarcerated White people was 31%, Hispanic 24% and Black 32%. Most inmates are persons of color.

God has work for us to do as we call out mandatory sentences for all crimes, pass "racial impact statement laws" to help undo the racial disparities and decriminalize low-level drug offenses.

Prison ministry stories

This Valentine's Day think of what you can do to become involved in prison ministry in some way. To encourage us, I want to share some stories by members of our Conference who are currently engaged in prison ministry.

[Read their stories](#)

I have personally engaged in this work for over 20 years, and I stand in awe of how much even a small effort done with God's love can make a big difference.

Sources:

Wikipedia

Catholic online

Sentencingproject.org

History.com

Special Prayers for these Wesley Family, Friends, and Others...

Edith Isaac, Linda Keister, Todd (Linda Keister's friend), Pinamang Boateng, John Davis (Ronna's husband), Dot Ellis, Earl Flagg, Jim Hoffman, Dorothy Norcross, Grace Woode, Baby "T" with a heart condition (friend of Carol Samanen), Beverly Grimshaw, Don Prior, Peter Woodcock, Joseph Boateng, Anne Burrows, Ray Cournoyer (friend of Bill Robbins), Al D'Ambra, Barbara Fletcher, Kathy Freeburn (friend of Linda D'Acri), Don Johnson (Phil's brother), Charles & Samira Kiefer, Sandra O'Driscoll, David Samanen, Alysia Simoneau, Janet Terzian, Donald Tremblay, Barbara, Frank & the Vietze Family; Laura Zoldak, Susan (friend of David Potts), Malika Gujarati (family of Jim & Judy Hoffman), Margie (Linda Keister's sister), Page (Allison Hansen's sister).
Those who struggle with depression, anxiety, and alcoholism.

Announcements

Vacation: Moo will be on vacation beginning Friday, January 26th and returning on Friday, February 9th. If you have a pastoral need or an emergency, please call the church office.

March Herald: *There are always extra copies of the Herald in the Narthex by the Welcome Office.* The March Herald will be part of the March 3 bulletin; however, it will be posted by March 1st. Please send all articles to me no later than Friday, February 26th. *Thank you, Debi*

From the Trustees

We continue to have occasional "visitors" in the building during hours when the building is closed, or when only custodial staff is present. We are sympathetic to the plight of the homeless, especially during these winter days and nights, and we try to address this issue in our community in a number of ways, but we cannot have unauthorized people in the building during off hours, for obvious safety and liability reasons. If you see anyone in the building you do not recognize, especially at off hours, please contact a member of our staff. We are contacting renters and those who use the building at off times to be diligent about not propping doors open or leaving them unattended. We have new security measures in place which should help, but it is just a reminder to keep the building secure especially if you should be in the building at off times. Thanks!

Ash Wednesday, February 14th

5:00 – 6:30 pm	Labyrinth Walk, Chapel
6:00 pm	Soup & Bread, Brewer Hall
6:30 pm	Service, Sanctuary

2024 Ash Wednesday Labyrinth Walk

Walking a labyrinth is a contemplative spiritual practice which symbolizes the Christian spiritual journey. The physical walking of the labyrinth provides time and space for interior reflection. On Ash Wednesday Wesley's floor labyrinth and materials for a self-guided walk will be available in the chapel from 5-6:30 pm as well as following the conclusion of the evening Ash Wednesday service. The walk is intended to open the way for your Lenten pilgrimage and to provide an opportunity for you to set your intentions for your spiritual walk through this holy season. All are welcome.

Lenten Brochures Available

The Lenten brochures will be available to pick up beginning Sunday, February 11 in the Narthex. If you cannot come in and would like one, please email Debi to have one mailed.

UWF to host affordable housing conversation March 9 with Ed Augustus

Ed Augustus, the Massachusetts Secretary of Housing and Livable Communities, will be the keynote speaker for a program on the affordable housing crisis at Wesley on Saturday, March 9. Together with panelists from local agencies, he will address approaches the state is taking to create more homes.

United Women in Faith will host the meeting with lunch at noon and the program at 1 p.m. All are welcome. Childcare will be available. Invite your friends!

Here's a Chance to Prevent Homelessness

It's a simple idea -- buy your groceries (or your coffee or toiletries) and help a local family stay in their home. You'll be joining area stores in contributing to a fund that gives grants to families facing eviction. One back rent payment, utility bill or storage unit fee can keep families out of the shelter system and all the disruption to their children's schooling.

Here's how it works: When you purchase gift cards from Big Y, Shaw's, Stop & Shop, CVS, Dunkin Donuts, Panera, Starbucks, Amazon, Target or TJ Maxx/Marshalls/Home Goods, a percentage of that card's value is donated by those stores to Central Mass. Housing Alliance. Families come to CMHA seeking assistance, and since this program began, hundreds of families have received aid.

Look for the birdhouse in Brewer Hall -- at a table near the stage -- after church services. Cards are for sale every Sunday and by email to AChis4788@aol.com. Order by Monday, February 12 for pickup on Sunday, February 18 pickup after the morning service.

Come choose a Sunday to help with card sales -- it takes a team to tackle a challenge as big (and fast-growing) as homelessness.

GOD MOMENT

If you could share a story of seeing God's work in your life, please tell me or email it to me. The story can be anonymous or signed, and all are invited to participate. Betsy (betspenn35@hotmail.com)

A God Moment from

Below is a quote from last September's "Wesley's Daily Reflection." It speaks to me of God Moments.

"...God works in quieter ways, obscure ways, ways that seem natural — like coincidence, like happenstance, like in the everyday decisions that we make all the time. God is at work in and through what happens around us, even when it doesn't seem like it. God is present, even when it feels like absence. God is acting, even when it feels like stillness."
Derek Weber

DID YOU KNOW?

The season of Lent begins on February 14 as we observe Ash Wednesday. We are all familiar with the custom of observing various spiritual disciplines, including such traditional practices as prayer, Bible study, and fasting during this season. Did you know that many denominations observe a kind of liturgical fasting by refraining from the use of the word *alleluia* in worship during this season?

Our English word *alleluia* comes from Greek and Latin transliterations of the Hebrew phrase *hallelu jah*, which is often written as one word *hallelujah* and translates as “Praise ye the Lord.” The word *alleluia* was used in early Christian liturgies as an expression of joy and praise viewed as being particularly appropriate for the Great Fifty Days of Easter. Since the word is used by the church as an expression of great joy, its use is often discontinued during the somber penitential season of Lent. In some traditions, the word *alleluia* is not used at all during the season of Lent in order to heighten the sense of celebration at Easter. One possible exception to this is the use of *alleluia* in funeral services, which are always viewed as celebrations of resurrection.

The omission of *alleluia* during Lent dates back to the fifth century. In the Middle Ages it became the custom to bid the *alleluia* farewell by singing special songs. Sometimes medieval church practice included the even more dramatic gesture of having a literal burial in the church graveyard of a box containing a physical representation of the *alleluia*.

Transfiguration Sunday, the final Sunday before Lent begins, marks the end of the period of ordinary time that follows Epiphany. Texts of many of the hymns and anthems written specifically for this festival Sunday include the word *alleluia* for one last time as we celebrate the glory and deity of Jesus. During the weeks of ordinary time following Epiphany we have been singing an extended version of the Doxology (UMH 94) which includes multiple iterations of the word *alleluia*. However, on Transfiguration Sunday (February 11) we will sing that particular Doxology for the last time until Easter. Our use of the Doxology found in UMH 95 during the season of Lent will contribute to a “fast” from the use of the word *alleluia*. This liturgical fast from using the word *alleluia* in worship during Lent will hopefully enable our alleluias to resound even more joyously when we sing them again on Easter Sunday.

Submitted by,

Deborah O’Driscoll

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