

VALENTINE'S DAY

What fun we had in school when I was a child as Valentine's Day drew near! The teacher would bring into the classroom a large cardboard box with a slot cut into the top. This box would then be covered with white paper and pasted over with all kinds of pretty cutouts, mostly hearts, that we students made in art class.

At home we were busy getting our valentines ready to take to school. The teacher never told us we *had* to give valentines to each other; it was just the custom of the time, one that we wished to participate in. Our parents bought us valentines at the Ben Franklin Five and Ten on Main Street in Annville, Pennsylvania. We children helped to pick them out, being sure to include one for Teacher. We addressed and signed them at home, then took them to school, dropping them into the Valentine Box in the days prior to the holiday. Oh, what joy that box contained, and what suspense!

But sometimes it contained frustration, sadness and disappointment, as well.

On Valentine's Day the box was opened and we took turns playing the role of postman. We would lift out a handful of the colorful cards and distribute them onto the desks of the intended receivers. What fun it was to see the cards pile up! What fun to see who gave you such a pretty card! But wait – this card is unsigned! And this one says "Guess Who?" That's not fair! Teacher, please find out who gave me this valentine. "All right. Who gave this card to Verna? You did, Lucy? Why didn't you sign it? I see. Look closely, Verna. Lucy's initials are hidden down in this corner." "Oh."

Then came the counting, the comparing, and the checking. "How many cards did you get? Twenty? I got twenty-four!" I feel sorry about this part of the celebration. Some boys and girls got far more cards than others, due to their popularity. Some even got more than one from the same person, inflating their total. They seemed to enjoy telling how many they got, not thinking how the ones with half the amount might feel. This is typical childhood behavior, of course; it takes a while to learn empathy. Ideally, I thought there should be one card per person from each of the others in the class, giving us all the same total. Then we could enjoy the cards and have none of the pain.

Twice I remember causing some of the sadness, though it was not my intention. My mother felt she could not afford to buy my brother and me enough cards so we could give one to each person in our classrooms. I don't know why I didn't make some cards to fill up the difference, but I didn't. Instead I had the difficult task of deciding who would get the ten or so cards that Mother did buy for each of us. In the fourth grade, when we were living on the farm, I remember Betty coming to me and saying, "I didn't get a card from you!" I knew right away that I had not been able to give her one, though she was a friend of mine, but I just couldn't tell her that. "Maybe it got lost while we were handing them out," I lied. We looked and looked, but that "lost" card never showed up.

In the fifth grade, when we were back in the Annville schools, the same situation happened, that is, I could not give a card to everyone. That time Jack came to me, full of disappointment, and said, "I'll bet I gave you the biggest valentine you got and you didn't give me *any*!"

These recollections no longer cause me pain, even as I write about the incidents, because they are part of the past, part of growing up. God is my Rear-guard; he has turned the pain of my childhood into valuable lessons. When it was time for me to buy the valentines for my children to give out in school, there were enough to go around, you may be sure. I know my mother did the best she could with the money available to her, and I have no complaints about that. It's not easy being a parent, any more than it's easy being a child!

One thing we all need is to know that we're loved. Valentine's Day did – and does – help us express our love to others. But there is a love *much* greater than human love, and that's the love that God has for each one of us. The whole Bible is full of love messages to us, and they are not anonymous, either! No mistaking *God's* love! Who else would come down to earth and die for us, even for the unlikable, the unpopular, the *worst* of us, in order to offer us a way to start a personal love-relationship with him? I'm talking about Jesus, the biggest, most expensive and wonderful Valentine that anyone could give us!

Now imagine this: some people do not want to accept God's Valentine! I do not remember any card being turned down in my school years; I can only imagine how completely devastating that would have been for the giver! I am so glad that I said "Yes" when God came to me with his offer of love. The cards from my childhood live only in my memory, but I cherish God's love for me every single day. I hope you do, too. And having God's love in place in our lives, we can then go on to share it with everyone we meet, every day – not just on February 14th. Shall we?

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