

*Gary Harder, Feb. 09, 2014*

**“On kissing frogs – and other valentine intimacies”**

**Text: Ephesians 2: 1-10**

**Introduction ( disclaimer or warning – this sermon is based on a comic and a fairy tale and a very sentimental holiday).**

**Ah, romance: Sweet, mushy, sloppy, sentimental, idealized romance. Please be my special valentine. When you are in grade three you send that special valentine’s card out to 30 classmates. And you expect to get that many cards back, each claiming that you are the senders’ very special valentine.**

**Except for Charlie Brown, of course. Valentines Day is particularly traumatic for him. Charlie Brown sends out his 30 valentines, and then waits and waits at his mail box. And waits and waits. Not a single valentine comes to him. Not a single one. If only the little red haired girl, that very special red haired girl, would send him a valentine. If only anyone at all would send him one. But he waits at that mail box in vain. His dog snoopy (who does get a valentine) waits there at the mail box with him, and finally gives him a sloppy lick in the face. Maybe next year.**

**St. Valentine, the Catholic priest after whom Valentine’s Day is named, had a more robust romance in mind. Mind you, the origin of Valentine’s Day is still somewhat disputed, so I can pick the story I like best. And that is this one.**

**In the Roman Empire February 14 was a holiday to honour Juno, goddess of women and marriage. The following day, Feb. 15, began the Feast of Lupercalia, a particularly pagan and erotic and sexualized festival.**

During the time of Emperor Claudius the second, Rome was involved in many very unpopular military campaigns, and far too few Roman men were signing on as soldiers. They didn't want to fight and die in unnecessary wars. Claudius though reasoned that they didn't want to sign up because they didn't want to leave wives and lovers behind. His solution? He cancelled all upcoming engagements and marriages. If these young men didn't have wives maybe they would be more ready to join the army.

A priest by the name of Valentine vehemently objected to this edict. Marriage was ordained by God. How could the emperor outlaw marriage just so that he could get more soldiers for his army? So he secretly officiated the marriages of many couples. But one day he was caught officiating a wedding, and was condemned to death.

As the story goes, many people visited him in jail, including the daughter of the prison guard. On the day he was to die, priest Valentine wrote a note to her thanking her for her friendship and loyalty. He signed it, "love from your Valentine". And then he was beheaded. And latter the church sainted him, and so he became Saint Valentine.

From him we get our Valentines Day. But there seems to be a bit of a gap between what he did and how the day is seen today. I suppose our Valentines Day has more affinity with the erotic festival of Lupercalia than it does with a priest secretly officiating Christian weddings.

And yet, there is a deep romance that I hope does run through our intimate relationships. And there is a very deep romance that runs through the Gospel – the romance of the love of God for each and every one of us.

**Text:** Ephesians 2 is the Gospel in a nutshell according to Paul. “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...” I love that imagery – “Made us alive together with Christ”. Paul continues. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast...But we are created for good works”.

Gathered to hear these words of Paul were both Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Jewish ones were always tempted to believe that their heritage and their keeping of the laws and their good works earned them brownie points with God. The Gentile ones found it hard to believe that God could love them without that heritage, and without them earning that love.

The deep truth of this well-known text from Ephesians is that all humans need a saviour. The deep truth is that we cannot save ourselves by keeping laws or doing good works. The deeper truth is that only God can save us, and does so by loving us. But then we are expected to do good works. We are not saved by our good works. We are saved by God’s powerful love. But we are saved to do good works. That is this sermon in a nutshell. The rest is only application. I might be wise to simply stop my sermon here, but I really did want to get to that fairy tale yet.

## **Kissing frogs**

**Which brings us to a fairy tale, as embellished a bit by Wes Seeliger (One inch from the fence, Forum House Publishers, 1973).**

**Ever feel like a frog? Frogs feel slow, low, ugly, puffy, drooped, pooped. I know. One told me. The frog feeling comes when –**

**You want to be bright, but feel dull.**

**You want to share, but are selfish.**

**You want to be thankful, but are resentful.**

**You want to be big, but are small.**

**You want to care, but are indifferent.**

**Yes, at one time or another, each one of us has found himself on a lily pad floating down the great river of life, frightened and disgusted, but too froggish to budge.**

## **The fairy tale**

**Once upon a time there was a frog. But he wasn't really a frog. He was a prince who looked like a frog. A wicked witch had cast a spell on him, and only the kiss of a beautiful young maiden could save him. But since when to cute chicks kiss frogs? So there he sat, an un-kissed prince in frog form.**

**But miracles happen. One day, a beautiful maiden grabbed him up and gave him a big smack. Crash, boom, zap! He became – he was – a handsome prince. And you know the rest. They lived happily ever after.**

**Sermonic observation. So what is the task of the church? TO KISS FROGS, of course.**

## **Self worth**

**The issue for the prince – and for many of us - was feeling froggish, feeling, low, feeling ugly, lacking self-worth, lacking self-esteem. I suspect that most of us feel the tension between feeling like a frog some times – maybe most times – and feeling like a prince or princess. Most of us struggle most of our lives with a healthy sense of self worth. (It is when we feel badly about ourselves that we are most likely to have relationship issues with the people we love. It is when we feel badly about ourselves that we are most likely to act out in damaging ways. It is when we feel badly about ourselves that we are most at risk of getting caught in addictive behaviours.)**

**And yet healthy self-esteem is hard to come by. We think if we work harder we will earn it. If we would only study harder and longer. If only we would practice more. We try so hard. We have all these self-improvement projects going on to improve our poor self-image. We work harder. We try to get better grades in school. We buy new clothes. We accumulate possessions, or boyfriends or girlfriends. We try to improve our looks, through cosmetics or exercise or surgery. We practice extra hard at sports. Surely if I become a sports hero, or music all-star, I would be loved.**

**There we are, on a sinking lily pad, taking croaking lessons, competing in the jumping Olympics, having wart augmentation surgery, getting another degree in fly-catching, buying up more lily pads. But nothing seems to help. Because everything heroic or cosmetic only gives a temporary boost, but doesn't**

**permanently change the inside. The change inside comes only from being loved – loved as we are, accepted as we are, warts and all. Only a kiss will do it.**

**Listen carefully. “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...” Made us alive together with Christ. What a great image. What a wonderful definition of salvation. The emptiness inside is filled. Life bubbles over with energy and vitality and love. Made alive.**

**There we were, a demoralized frog on a lily pad in a smelly swamp. And one day royalty came along, the God of the puckered lips in the guise of a beautiful princess, and gave us a big smack right on our ugly lips – crash, boom, zap. A kiss, just when we were feeling un-kissable. A kiss, a great big smacker, and the metamorphosis began.**

**The Bible says this over and over again. God loves you. God loves me. Period. No qualifications. God loves us. Know it. Feel it. Experience it deeply at the core of your being.**

### **Application**

**Ah, the God of the puckered lips is on a kissing expedition. Having kissed us, and turned us from frogs into princes and princesses, God invites us to join the kissing army.**

**God has a whole army of puckered lips out there. This army doesn’t go about pouring insecticide into the swamp trying to get rid of the frogs. It doesn’t go about telling everyone how froggish they really are. Everyone knows that already.**

**They point instead to the possibility of being princes and princesses. Their job is to love, to affirm, to encourage, to value, to make special, to risk kissing someone with smelly breath.**

**I think this needs to start at home. You spouses, be true valentines to each other at home. Kiss each other in spite of smelly breath, and especially when the other feels froggish. We so easily become experts in finding fault with each other. It so easily happens that we start to major in complaints and criticisms after a long marriage. And we so easily forget that our spouse, like we ourselves, can only live with joy by repeatedly being kissed and affirmed and told that he or she is deeply loved. I think Saint Valentine would approve. He risked beheading to bless couples getting married.**

**Parents, you have the sacred privilege, and duty, to be the primary kissing prince and princess for your children as they grow up. Don't allow a negative atmosphere in your home. Don't major in criticizing and reprovng your children. Don't run them down. Of course there have to be guidelines and rules and discipline. These are part of a genuine love. But far more there has to be constant affirmation, constant building up, constant loving, constant kissing. Otherwise they can never turn into the beautiful princesses and princes they were created to be. And children – don't be too "cool" to show, and express your love for your parents. Parents too get down and discouraged and need to be told they are loved. (Our daughter-in-law is so free in telling us so often that she loves us, and that is making us more free to verbalize our love).**

**Grandparents, what an incredible gift our grandchildren are to us. And what a gift we can be to them. See their beauty, not their blemishes. Gift them constantly with your unconditional love. Be at the forefront of God's kissing army giving out big smackers to them without ceasing.**

**Single people in the church –I hope you know that you are valued and appreciated and loved for who you are. Your worth is intrinsic, and not dependant on being married, on having a spouse. You are such an important part of God's kissing army.**

**The church is a gathering of God's kissing army. In our worship we hear again that God loves us, and we reaffirm our love for God – and for each other. Loving each other does not mean always agreeing with each other. In fact, within a loving family it is quite okay to sometimes disagree with each other and to challenge each other, and to discuss and debate and even confront and sometimes get upset or angry with each other. These are all okay.**

**What is not okay is to take away the dignity of the other, to silence the other, to major in judging, criticising, gossiping, belittling, or avoiding – all of which just could turn them back into frogs. We are all just turning into princes and princesses yet, and could so easily turn back into frogs again if pushed in that direction. Instead, in this kissing army we have the amazing privilege, and calling, to build each other up, to affirm each other, to help each other uncover the image of God in each one of us.**



**And then there are our neighbors and our co-workers, and our classmates, and the people who serve us and the people we serve, many of them needing a kiss rather than a rebuke.**

**“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another”.**

**So what is the task of the church? TO KISS FROGS, of course.**

**“With love, from your valentine.”**