

FAITH

Matters

Written by **Matt Dodrill**, Senior Pastor, Pulaski Heights Baptist Church

Valentine's Day is right around the corner, so naturally the topic of love will be on many people's minds. But if we're going to be faithful to Saint Valentine's legacy, we need to expand the definition of love beyond mere romance.

Saint Valentine was a 3rd century Christian bishop who made quite a stir when he performed weddings knowing that marriage would make husbands immune from military conscription. When he was in prison, he tried to convert the Roman emperor to the Christian faith, which didn't go as planned. Angered by the bishop's audacity, the emperor sentenced him to death, and Saint Valentine was promptly beaten and beheaded on February 14th—the day on which we still celebrate his holiday.



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C.S. Lewis famously drew a distinction between the “four loves,” two of which are significant when thinking about Saint Valentine. The first type of love is *eros*, which we might define as romantic love. It's the kind of love we typically associate with Valentine's Day, where two lovers reciprocate intense desire for each other. The second type of love is *agape*, which can be defined as the self-sacrificial love we offer even to our enemies—the kind of love Saint Valentine offered to the emperor, who could not be expected to reciprocate such love.

That these two types of love – *eros* and *agape* – converge in the person (and legend) of Saint Valentine is quite instructive. After all, romantic love within a monogamous relationship trains our desires and forms a powerful bond that becomes stronger than the romance itself. In other words, romantic love (*eros*) is transformed into self-sacrificial love (*agape*)—the kind of love that's necessary within covenantal relationships, where married couples live together, endure hardships together, annoy each other, and occasionally dislike each other. *Agape* is the kind of love that says, “Through thick and thin (but especially through thick), we belong to each other.”

Paradoxically, then, romance facilitates the kind of bond that won't allow couples to abandon each other when the romance dissipates. The great singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell puts it best:

“With a long relationship, things die, then are rekindled, and that shared process of rebirth deepens the love. It's hard work, though, and a lot of people run at the first sign of trouble. You're with this person, and suddenly you look like [a jerk] to them, or they look like [a jerk] to you — it's unpleasant, but if you can get through it you get closer, and you learn a way of loving that's different from the neurotic love enshrined in movies. It's warmer and has more padding to it.”

Here's hoping for a warmer, *agapic* Valentine's Day.

