

Suffering for Love

By Taryn R. Hutchison

This week, Americans will spend roughly 14 billion dollars on Valentine's Day. The average person will fork out about \$103.

We will send out 190 million valentines by snail mail or electronically. Florists typically bring in one-third of their annual revenue this week, selling approximately 110 million roses.

Some might say opening their wallets makes them suffer. But the roots of Valentine's Day can be traced back to someone who suffered to the point of death – and all for love.

According to the "Golden Legend," a medieval bestseller compiled around the year 1260, the historical person St. Valentine was persecuted as a Christian. Roman Emperor Claudius II threatened him with death if he didn't renounce his faith. Not only did Valentine refuse, he even tried to win Claudius over to Jesus Christ.

Claudius had Valentine beaten and imprisoned, sentenced to death. While awaiting his execution, Valentine healed his jailer's blind daughter and converted her entire family to Christ. He was decapitated on February 14, A.D. 270.

How was Valentine able to endure torture and death? He undoubtedly looked to Christ's example and counted the eternal life Jesus offers worth more than his temporal life on earth. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters." (I John 3:16).

Over the centuries, the tale has become embellished. One story line, probably propagated by the greeting card industry, says that Valentine wrote to a young lady (either his beloved or the jailer's daughter) the evening before his execution. He signed it, "From your Valentine." Hence, the custom began.

It's a stretch to go from Valentine's story of sacrifice and courage, taking place nearly two millennia ago, to giving chocolates and heart-shaped cards today. But there is a modern-day account being written which is closer to the reality Valentine endured.

Followers of Christ around the globe still suffer and die for their faith, even in our so-called civilized age. Why do they do it? They do it for love - not romantic love but because the love of Christ compels them. They are able to do it because God loved them first.

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us." (I John 4: 18-19).

Christians are dying for their faith at the rate of one every five minutes, according to “The Price of Freedom Denied” by sociologists Grim and Finke. On average, 280 Christians were martyred every day (12 per hour) over the past decade.

The word “martyr” comes from the root word “witness.” Our common usage speaks to a steep price exacted for that witness: death.

Witnessing can bring feelings of unease, but we don’t risk being tortured because of it. We may be ridiculed for our relationship with Christ. But persecuted? I don’t think so.

Most Americans are oblivious to the plight of the persecuted. Many deny that it could possibly happen today. Yet last year alone, 105,000 new Christian martyrs entered heaven’s gates. That’s a steep increase from 1900, when 34,000 were murdered.

While we freely worship in churches, thousands of our persecuted brothers and sisters around the globe worship in chains – imprisoned for their faith. Maybe this Valentine’s Day, the red color of our cards and flowers will bring to mind the blood of martyrs.

And remind us to pray for those who suffer for the love of Christ.