



First Love

O love of God,

How rich and pure!

How measureless and strong!

It shall forevermore endure—

The saints' and angels' song.

My first love was Miss Heintz. The year was 1957; I was six years old, and head-over-heels in love with my pretty first grade teacher. This was the era of post-war innocence, of little boys in rolled-cuff jeans (just like the TV cowboys we wished to emulate), and prim little girls in patent leather shoes, white anklets, and dresses with multiple layers of petticoats.

At that tender age there were few ways available to me to express my love for Miss Heintz. After all, when one is all of six years old, “love” is a hazy concept at best. At that age one doesn’t really *do* anything with love; one just feels it catch in the throat, and simmer quietly in the belly. I know that in February of 1958 I gave Miss Heintz a valentine, and in May of that year I surely gave her a little homemade May Basket filled with candy, popcorn, and a few purple violets. And I recall quite vividly the day I took advantage of her momentary absence from the classroom to express my devotion by writing her name on the blackboard—only to discover her standing there, just inside the doorway, watching as I finished my unauthorized penmanship. To this day, forty-nine years later, I can still see her standing there, arms crossed in front of her, trying desperately to be cross with me over my transgression, but struggling to stifle her laughter instead.

Yes, Miss Heintz was my first love—but she was not the first to love me.

If queried at that young age, I might have answered that the first to love me were my parents. They surely did love me—even on those days I got a licking for arriving home late from school or for falling in the creek at the playground. They certainly loved me before I was old enough to love back—but I know now that even they were not the first.

Before I was Born

The first to love me was someone I had never met. When I was born there was someone who loved me more than my parents, more than my older brother, and certainly more than my future first grade teacher.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)...

Ephesians 2:4-5

During my earliest years, I certainly knew *about* God, but I did not yet love Him. My parents began taking me to church when I was still in a basket. A few years later, I was old enough to sit upright in the wooden pew, but was utterly bored with the proceedings, requiring some sort of amusement during the hour-long service. Dad would let me play with the mechanical pencil he always carried inside his suit coat, or Auntie Norma would fashion cutouts with her red lacquered finger nails. I wasn't paying much attention, but I was there, soaking it all up. I was steadily hearing about God, but I did not yet love Him.

I didn't know it at the time, but He already loved me. In fact, he knew and loved me, like the prophet Jeremiah, before I was born.

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you;
I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Jeremiah 1:5

While I was still too young to experience love for anyone outside my family, God already loved me with an intense, visceral, sacrificial love.

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:6-8

Paradox

Even early on, in an unformed, infantile way I instinctively knew that to persuade someone to love me—be it Miss Heintz, or the little girl at the next desk—I should first *demonstrate* my "love" for them. At the time, this meant giving Valentines, and making May Baskets out of colored construction paper and paste. It meant doing nice things for someone, giving them presents. It also meant showing them your best behavior as often as possible, demonstrating that you were, somehow, *worthy* of their return affection.

Considering all that God has to offer us, and what little we have to offer in return, it would seem that the God/Human relationship is perversely turned on its head. We come into this world mired in the sin nature, utterly bereft of anything that might recommend ourselves to a superior being. We are thoroughly unlovely, from His perspective, and lacking any redeeming qualities.

Yet—and here is where we step into the Twilight Zone—given that God has nothing to prove and we have everything to prove, He loves us *first*. Before we are even able to return His love for us, He loves us completely, wholeheartedly, enthusiastically, sacrificially. He owes us nothing, and we owe Him everything, yet He is the one who extends Himself toward us.

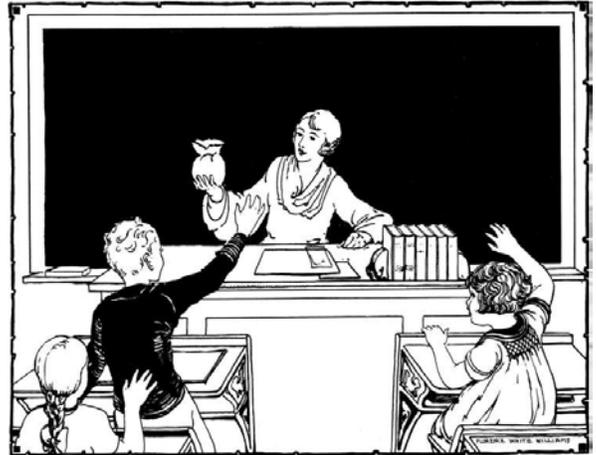
And now it gets even more strange: God does this not for Himself, but for us! For *our* benefit, for *our* good.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

John 3:16-17

No matter what I tried back in those heady days of the first grade, I never succeeded in convincing Miss Heintz to love me. There was an unspannable gulf between us.

There also was a seemingly unspannable gulf between God and me, but God the Father, in love, reached out across that gulf, and drew me to Him.



*The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell,
It goes beyond the highest star
And reaches to the lowest hell;
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave His Son to win:
His erring child He reconciled
And pardoned from his sin.*

*Could we with ink the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were ev'ry stalk on earth a quill
And ev'ry man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Tho stretched from sky to sky.*

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How rich and pure!
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