

I can still remember a high school friend of mine saying, "I don't see how anybody can believe in the Bible. It's filled with contradictions." I never could get him to tell me exactly where those contradictions were, so I never believed him. But if he were to walk into church this morning, I'd have to tell him. "You were right after all. And today's Gospel is a perfect example."

For starters, Jesus says, "I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Not the smallest letter of the law, not the smallest part of a letter, shall be done away with." There were 613 laws in the Old Testament. They included love God and love your neighbor, but also rules about the sacrifice of bulls, the impurity of menstruous women, and the necessity of circumcision. No Christian church follows all those laws. St. Paul says the law does not justify us; faith does (Gal 2); and that the righteousness of God has been revealed apart from the law (Rom 3, 21). Farther, Jesus himself repeatedly disobeyed the law by healing on the sabbath and eating with people whom the law called unclean. Did that Jesus really say, "Not the smallest part of a letter of the law will be done away with"? If so, he contradicts himself.

Later on in the same passage, Jesus takes up divorce. The prophet Malachi had warned married people to remain faithful (2, 16). But Deuteronomy permitted divorce, and gave some directions for it (24, 1-4). St. Paul asked Christians not to separate (1 Cor 7, 10-14) but admits that it happens. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus says, "Let no one separate what God has joined." Period. Case closed. But in Matthew, Jesus says divorce is adultery, remarriage is adultery, but "lewd conduct" is a separate case. No one knows what "lewd conduct" means here, but it looks like the Jesus of Matthew's Gospel admits there are exceptions to what the Jesus of Mark's Gospel said about divorce.

So, I'd like to ignore all this and talk about Valentine's Day. After all, it's a politically correct celebration of a Christian feast. The problem is we don't know exactly who Valentine was. His burial place lies north of Rome, so we think he was a priest martyred around the year 270. But 60 miles away and a century or so later the people of Terni claimed Valentine was their bishop. Well, maybe yes, maybe no. All we really know is that somebody named Valentine died. An old legend claims that the first birds of spring mated on February 14, which happened to be the day the rest of us who were not mating celebrated St. Valentine's Day. All the roses and chocolates have more to do with zoology than the history of St. Valentine.

I wish the Bible were neat. I wish history was clear. Contradictions and ambiguity obscure understanding. But that's the way it is with relationships. Love is not neat. Love is not clear. Contradictions and ambiguity fill every relationship that's important to us. Faith, like love, is a matter of the heart. Once we believe the inconsistencies don't matter as much, because the heart knows as much as the mind. We asked my aunt once how she was able to teach high school students for 50 years. Even parents don't have to live with high school students for 50 years. She said, "I've learned to overlook a lot." And we do too, every time we fall in love.