

“Star Quality”

2 Peter 1:16-21

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 17 He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “this is my Son; with Him I am well pleased.” 18 We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mountain.

19 We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Roses are red, violets are blue. Valentine’s Day rakes in all kinds of money from you. Valentine’s Day is a big cash cow for the retail sector in the United States. Americans spent \$27.5 billion on Valentine’s Day in 2025, according to the National Retail Federation. That works out to more than \$188 per household.

Where did all that money go? Florists prepared over 250 million roses for their customers. About 56% of Americans purchased candy. Restaurants made out well, too. Last year, full-service restaurants reported a 41% increase in Valentine’s Day diners compared to a normal day, according to the Toast online service. Take-out sales were up 46%.

And let’s not forget the pets. Americans spent \$1.5 billion on Valentine’s Day gifts for their pets last year. In case you are curious, the average expenditure was \$31 for dogs and \$27 for cats¹ — definitive proof that dogs do better than cats at returning their owners’ affection!

It seems clear from the Valentine’s Day retail juggernaut that our society is in love with love. The person who wins the prize for being in love with love was a man named Glynn “Scotty” Wolfe. You probably haven’t heard of Mr. Wolfe. He died alone in 1997 in a Redlands, California nursing home at the age of 88. No one showed up at the morgue to claim his body. The city had to pay for a pauper’s grave. This may seem unusual, because Mr. Wolfe was a bona fide world record-holder. He achieved a certain level of fame — or, at least, notoriety — in his 88 years.

Guinness World Records describes Scotty Wolfe as the “Most Married Man.” He had no fewer than 29 marriages. This means that 29 times in his long life, Mr. Wolfe walked into a church or ascended the courthouse steps to pledge lifelong faithfulness to one woman. But somehow, for Scotty, it never quite worked out that way. You kind of have to wonder about the judgment of wives 27, 28 and 29 — although, as poet Alexander Pope says, “hope springs eternal in the human breast.”

Wolfe's shortest marriage lasted 19 days; his longest, 11 years. Three of his marriages were to women he had previously divorced. When Mr. Wolfe died, he left behind 19 children, at least 40 grandchildren, and 19 great-grandchildren. His ex-in-laws were too numerous to count. But when Scotty Wolfe died, he died alone. Mr. Wolfe is an extreme example, of course, but he does exemplify how shallow being in love with love can be.

On Valentine's Day, many of us shared expressions of love with those dearest to us in the form of cards or heart-shaped boxes of chocolates. Let's hope the Valentine's hearts we handed over were about a lot more than being in love with love! Where did the familiar heart symbol come from anyway?

The symbol has a long, historical lineage going back to prehistoric times. One of the oldest examples is an Indus Valley Civilization pendant embossed with a heart-shaped fig leaf. It dates to 300–100 B.C.E. In medieval European art, the heart was often depicted upside-down. It flipped in the 15th century for some unknown reason. Its appearance as one of the four playing-card suits sealed the deal. The heart symbol we know — pointed at the bottom, with two curved surfaces on the top — became standard.³ The heart symbol is so strongly identified with love that it can even stand in for the word. In the late 20th century, the "I Love New York" tourism slogan — with a heart standing in for the word "love" — made that clear enough.

But maybe we need a new symbol if a heart can just as easily call to mind a trip up the Empire State Building or carriage ride through Central Park as it can a lifetime commitment! Maybe we should do away with the heart symbol?

What would be a good candidate for a new symbol? Here's a suggestion: the star. It's even biblical. You will find it in today's Scripture reading from 2 Peter. This short letter, tucked into the back of the New Testament, celebrates a time to come when "the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19).

The morning star, of course, is Jesus Christ. You will also find that phrase in another place in the New Testament. The book of Revelation has the risen and exalted Christ announcing, "I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star" (Revelation 22:16).

Amateur astronomers among us know what the morning star is: the planet Venus. It often appears just above the horizon in those waning, gray moments before dawn. Venus ascends as a bright star, harbinger of the dawn soon to come. To the ancients — shepherds encamped on a quiet hillside or weary soldiers on all-night sentry duty — the appearance of the morning star signaled that daylight was not far off. It spoke of hope, bestowing confidence that what appears now as gloom and darkness is short-lived.

Maybe it was after one of those bright, cold New England nights that Robert Frost wrote his well-known poem about a star. It's called "Choose Something Like a Star." It was later set to music by the composer Randall Thompson. For centuries, our ancestors looked to the stars for wisdom — much like the child who sings, "Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are." Here is Frost's take on what stars have to teach us:

O Star (the fairest one in sight), We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud — It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light. Some mystery becomes the proud,
But to be wholly taciturn, in your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn. By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says, ‘I burn.’ But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade. Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend. It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end. And steadfast as Keats’ Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere, It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height, So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far, We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.⁴ [NOTE 1]

What difference would it make if we swapped out the prevailing love symbol of a heart pierced by Cupid’s arrow for a morning star rising in our own hearts? If, following the poet’s advice, we choose something like a star, would we find something solid to stand on in our intimate relationships and lives of faith — something to “stay our minds on and be staid”?

If the star we choose is the bright morning star, Jesus Christ, we indeed receive strength for living and loving. The heart symbol has taken on so much cultural baggage, from high-calorie confections to risqué greeting cards, that it’s an uphill climb to discern any core Christian love still dwelling inside it.

Many of us know that Greek, the language of the New Testament, has several different words for love. There’s *philia* — the love of friend for another friend. There’s *eros* — romantic or sensual love, from which our word “erotic” comes. And there is *agapé*, the highest love of all. It is a totally selfless, altruistic kind of love, the love demonstrated by Christ on the cross. Our faith honors all three kinds of love, but *agapé* is clearly the most deeply cherished.

If an intimate partnership — be it marriage, friendship or family — is to thrive in the deepest possible sense, it must have Christian love, *agapé*, at its core. Not just any old love will do — not Cupid love, not Valentine’s love, not X-rated movie love. Only Christlike love will do. And you can’t discover that Christlike love without first knowing Christ, the bright morning star. [NOTE 2]

This is not to say that love is ever easy or instantaneous — or that Jesus casually drops it into our lives as easily as dropping a Valentine’s card into a mailbox. Christian love can be hard work. But it’s holy work. Work, set apart for us to do, by God! Like any work worth doing, it brings joy in its accomplishment, joy greater than almost any other accomplishment in this life.

Love is the indelible mark of God that defines who we are, how we relate to one another, and our surrounding world. The Bible shows that love is the greatest of all human qualities and expressions. We do well when we remember that love is patient, kind, rejoices in the truth, is full of hope, and has no end (1 Corinthians 13). We find

our place when we love God with all our heart and love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39).

An eight year old student named Jessica wrote in her paper, You really shouldn't say "I love you" unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget. —Attributed to a wise 8-year-old named Jessica.

There is a Sufi Islam story I love about the wise fool, Mullah Nasreddin. It goes like this: Darkness had fallen, and Nasreddin had lost his keys. He knelt by a lamppost, searching. A friend joined him, and after a long while, asked, "Where exactly did you lose the keys?" "In my house," Nasreddin said. The friend asked exasperated, "What? In your house? Why are we looking here?" To which Nasreddin replied, "There is more light here."

Ms. Johnson of the New York Times writes, "The only three men I had ever imagined a future with all told me that something was missing, and I had let their words haunt me for years, scouring my memories of us for flaws. But maybe their quest for a missing feeling was a bit like Nasreddin's futile search: They were looking for a relationship to fill an emotional void rather than searching within themselves." ...or searching with the wisdom of God through the Holy Spirit.

"But this is not the kind of love I want for myself," wrote Johnson. I believe that life feels wrong most of the time, and it is enough to find someone who will help you find humor in the wrongness, who will bear witness to your loneliness rather than relieve you of it entirely. I believe that the most passionate love is experienced by people who embrace the imperfection of their relationship, who see it as a fixer-upper with good bones. I believe that when you are with a wonderful person but something indescribable feels missing, you take your partner's hand and search for it together. —Oz

Johnson, "In Praise of the 10-Percent Wrong Relationship," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/25/style/modern-love-breakup-10-percent-wrong-relationship.html>. Retrieved 9-4-2025.

When it comes to relationships, success in loving, means recognizing the complexity of the person we love. It means acknowledging that this person is not the same as us — that we never fully complete the work of knowing our beloved. The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke is not naive to love's difficulty when he says this: A merging of two people is an impossibility, and where it seems to exist, it is a hemming-in, a mutual consent that robs one party or both parties of their fullest freedom and development. But once the realization is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distances exist, a marvelous living side-by-side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of always seeing each other as a whole and before an immense sky.⁵ [NOTE 3]

There's wisdom in those words. Truly loving another involves not just loving the other directly, but also loving the expanse that separates the two of you, and loving the differences between you that make love a dare, a challenge and an adventure. It is not enough simply to show up one day with a heart-shaped box of chocolates ... although it surely doesn't hurt! It is the ongoing relationship — even the routine dailyness of living together — that makes the difference.

That's something our friend Mr. Wolfe, the "Most Married Man," apparently found hard to understand. He spent much of his life chasing after a mistaken and shallow ideal of freedom. Like many in our culture, he equated freedom with options — with having a great many choices arrayed before him. [NOTE 4]

But that isn't true freedom. The deepest sort of freedom in this life consists not in flitting capriciously from choice to choice, but rather in making the same choice, day in and day out, throughout our lives. Those who are most successful in marriage, friendship or family are those who realize they do have a choice, each day of their lives, whether to stay in that relationship, but continue to choose their beloved, come what may. It isn't vows shared, once upon a time, that keep a couple together. It is vows ceaselessly renewed, day after day, week after week, year after year — a continual and joyful choosing of the other. [NOTE 5]

So, let us not look to the lacy, frilly valentine heart as our symbol for love. Rather, let us celebrate the steady, daily rising of a star — the morning star, Jesus Christ, who rises in our hearts. And let us resolve to display such star quality in our own loving relationships! —Carl Wilton contributed to this material.

“Sermon Notes for” Star Quality” based on 2 Peter 1: 16-21
Given on February 15, 2026 at Doster Community Church”

- I. Jesus Christ is the bright morning star. There are Four Words in Greek for the one word in English: Eros, Philia, Storge, and Agape. Eros is romantic or sensual love. Philia is for friend or platonic love. Storge is for the kind of love between family like parents for children. Agape love is unconditional, limitless, and sacrificial love.
- II. In any intimate partnership, be it marriage, friendship or family; for it to thrive it must have Christian Agape love at its core. Not Love if, Love because, but Love period, love no matter what. Christian love can be hard work but it's holy work.
- III. It's not enough to simply show up one day with a heart-shaped box of chocolates—although it doesn't hurt. It is the ongoing relationship that makes the difference!
- IV. The deepest sort of freedom in this life consists not in flitting from choice to choice, but rather in making the same choice, day in and day out, throughout our lives. To keep on keeping on choosing the loved one!
- V. What are you going to do about it? Let us not look to the lacy valentine heart as our symbol for love. Rather, let us celebrate the steady, daily rising of a star — the morning star, Jesus Christ and have that star quality in the way we love God and others.