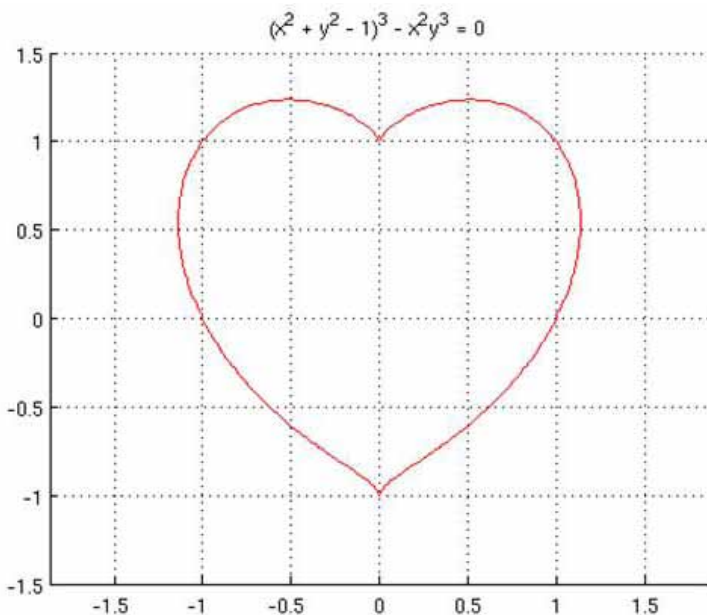


Weekly Musings + February 14, 2011



I suppose I would be remiss if I said nothing about Valentine's Day. Of course the valentine's red heart, as I am sure you have noticed, looks nothing like a human heart. It has existed on playing cards from at least the 15th century. Many people have theories about what it represents, some of which are more plausible than others. I think the best bet is the silphium seed.

This is a coin from Cyrene minted early in the fifth century B.C. Cyrene was located in present day Libya. On the left it shows the ear or seed pod of the silphium plant and on the right the "heart" shaped seed. It is from my own collection and is quite rare. The silphium plant was used for birth control. Although having children, giving the astounding infant mortality rates in antiquity, was generally desired; among certain women, it was not desired. Thus this plant was heavily marketed. The larger coins from Cyrene show the whole plant which is related to celery.



The original St. Valentine was one of the earlier saints and given the long stretch of history between him and us, it is difficult to ascertain who he actually was. Most of the stories associated with him look suspiciously like they are fulfilling a more modern need. For a long time it was thought that Valentine's Day was promulgated by the church to supersede Lupercalia, a Roman festival which involved the sacrifice of a dog and naked youths running around striking women of child bearing age with a thong soaked with sacrificial blood. The festival also had cleansing connotations. All in all, the Romans thought it good fun. This substitution theory has recently been challenged by revisionists (the original theory comes from the 18th century) on the ground that there is no basis in history for it. However, that substitution is exactly what the church did for Christmas (superseding winter solstice) so I am inclined to think the theory about superseding Lupercalia is probably correct. No doubt the date of St. Valentine's martyrdom coincided conveniently with the date of Lupercalia. It is just possible that the original relics of the saint (who may have been martyred near Rome on the Flavian Way) might be in the vast necropolis underneath the Vatican.

Certainly love is central to the gospel of Christ. However, it is well to remember that the notion that God is love occurs only once in the New Testament, in one of the Johannine letters. It is fair to say that nothing, not even the notion of love however lofty, may take the place of Christ as the center of Christianity. The love of the gospels is sacrificial love, agape (agape), or as Thornton Wilder calls it in "The Bridge of San Luis Rey", disinterested love.

Be all this as it may, I hope you remember your loved ones this day. They are, properly understood, all gifts from God.

News from St. Luke's

We are all saddened by the death of Kory Gilstrap, beloved son of Carolyn and Ken Gilstrap and brother of Devin and Christina. He was always a bright spot at the 10 am Eucharist. His memorial service with Eucharist will be Tuesday at 4:30 pm. Thanks to all who have offered to help.

