

Ash Wednesday
February 11, 2018
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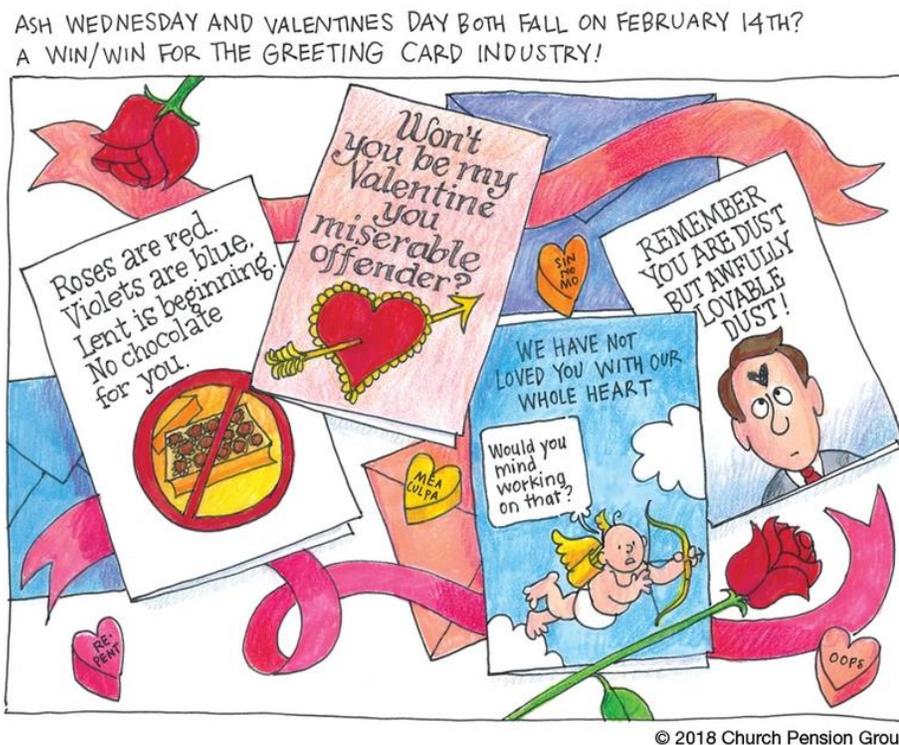
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103:8-14
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Happy Valentine's Day. That's the easy greeting today. Happy Ash Wednesday? Not so much.

I first noticed that our observance of Ash Wednesday here would come up against the wider cultural celebration of Valentine's Day quite some time ago.

It's just a quirk in how calendars line up the days, of course. But it's an unusual quirk. It hasn't happened since 1945. (We'll only have to wait another six years for it to happen again though.)

Maybe the coincidence of dates is nothing more than a source of amusement. The cartoon calendar we post on one of our bulletin boards finds humor there.



The cartoonist's premise is fanciful and farcical ... and the imagined cards are absurd, of course.

Nobody really wants a card like that, and the greeting card industry isn't interested in Ash Wednesday.

And maybe it's assumed we won't be much interested in Valentine's Day either.

But maybe we should be. Maybe it's a "win-win" for us more here at the start of Lent.

I'm reminded of a short poem by the Sufi poet Hafiz:

The subject tonight is Love
And for tomorrow night as well,
As a matter of fact
I know of no better topic
For us to discuss
Until we all
Die!

I'm sure I've shared that poem at a couple of weddings, including at least one here at Trinity. I'm not so sure, but I think I've also recalled it at a funeral once. In either case, as Hafiz said:

I know of no better topic
For us to discuss
Until we all
Die!

And that, of course, is what makes it an appropriate topic for us on Ash Wednesday, as well. We are marked with ashes and reminded that we all die. The sobering reminder of our mortality is an encouragement for us to ponder what matters most to us. And that is why, as we begin our observance of this holy season of Lent, "I know of no better topic for us" than love.

And so, I offer a suggestion – especially if you haven't decided on a Lenten discipline this year: maybe you could make love your discipline for Lent. Rather than merely giving something up for Lent, taking on a habit of love would probably make for a more rewarding experience.

It would probably do more good, as well. That said, I don't know what it would necessarily look like for anyone to take on a discipline of love this Lent. But that may be its virtue. Rather than a burden imposed upon you, the idea that love is your Lenten discipline might be an invitation for you to get creative; it might become an adventure to begin.

If that's appealing, I say "go for it!" Do love this Lent.

It's a pretty simple idea, I suppose. But I doubt it's at all easy.

And it isn't quick either. That might be another point in its favor. The cultural celebration doesn't likely go as deep as a Lenten discipline would take us. As one observer put it, "people treat love like fast food when love – and all things of God – take time." Valentine's Day is but a day. On this day, love is celebrated with a box of chocolates, perhaps, and a dozen roses.

But if we were to make love a discipline for Lent, we'd give it more than a day. As we should.

We might start with something as basic as an intention to give time over to the one we seek to love: extra time in prayer or worship, perhaps, if love of God is the aim; time given over to the service of a stranger (at Family Kitchen, perhaps) or time set aside for dinner or a walk, if love of neighbor (or our beloveds) is the intention; or time just sitting unplugged in solitude – at home or in nature or with a good book – if an authentic love of self is the goal.

I have a word of caution, all the same. Any Lenten discipline will probably disappoint if it's merely a self-imposed challenge to do better. Even if the discipline is to love better, it will probably fail us if it, too, is merely an onerous burden of doing more.

For that reason, I invite you to be open to the good news of Lent that tells you that before you love, you are already God's beloved. In our first reading this evening, for example, we hear the ancient words of the prophet Joel, beginning with these ominous words:

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm ...

And again midway through the reading:

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly; gather the people.*

But the love of God is the reason for sounding an alarm and for sanctifying a fast:

*Return to the Lord, your God, [who] is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love ...*

It's been said that if the distance between us and God is 1,000 steps, then God takes the first 999; we need to take but one step. The love of God reaches out to us and asks us to accept what is so freely given.

And I hear something similar in Jesus' words in our gospel this evening. On the face of it, his tone seems harsh. Don't be like the hypocrites, he says repeatedly. But Jesus isn't merely telling us that they're bad. He's telling us, I think, that they're missing out on what's being offered. Jesus repeats the reminder that God "sees in secret" – which is to say, into the depths of who we are, into our hearts. His point, I think, is that God longs to connect deeply with us ... that the God who sees into our hearts longs to reward us there ... to bless us and to love us.

In just a few moments, I'll invite you to observe a holy Lent. And then ashes will be imposed, reminding us that we all die, and encouraging us to ponder what matters most to us. With the poet, "I know of no better topic for us" – in Lent or in life – than love.

May we who are gathered here this night celebrate Ash Wednesday ... and Valentine's Day too. And may they both be reminders of love, of love given us and of love given us to be shared. May that be our beginning of Lent this year. And may we celebrate the same when Lent comes to its end.