

February 14, 2018
Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:12-19

It's kind of strange having Valentine's Day fall on the same day as Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the penitential season of Lent. Few of us consider Valentine's Day as St. Valentine's Day, a commemoration of the third century martyr who died for love of Christ. For most, Valentines is a happy and almost frivolous holiday of flowers, chocolates and mushy-gooshy greeting cards espousing romance, love and even eroticism—a day pretty much devoid of any religious aspect.

Contrast that with Ash Wednesday—a weighty, somber day of penitential reflection on our sin and desperate need of forgiveness—a day that pretty much makes us feel like dirt, or ash, as the case may be.

Valentines Day is light, joyful, a celebration of one of the best parts of human life. Ash Wednesday? “From dust you came, and to dust you shall return.” Quite the contrast.

But there is actually a lot of truth in this dichotomy.

That which we celebrate on Valentines, our human nature's idea of love, is qualified in all sorts of ways. First off, there's who we love. We love family. We love close friends. We love our spouse, fiancée, significant other. We're good with our neighbors and acquaintances. Our enemies, not so much. And any of these, even family, can lose our love if they treat us badly enough long enough. Let's face it, a lot of our loving others is quite tied up in if those others are responding and returning our love.

And our love can be very measured, very limited. Back in the day when I celebrated Valentine's Day I remember the struggle; how do I pull off a gift and evening spending as little as possible, but spending enough that my girlfriend doesn't realize how cheap I really am. My

thinking was, I love her, but let's be reasonable about this. We think of loving "enough". We put limits on how far we'll go for love, how much we'll tolerate. Simply put, we will love another, but do so while protecting one's self.

And especially on Valentines Day, love is about emotion. Dinner, candy, flowers, gifts—none of this is earth shattering stuff. We do it other days. Valentines Day isn't about action. It's about romance. It's more about feeling the love that exists between two people than it is about doing anything.

Now consider God's love.

It's unqualified. God doesn't love only those who love Him. He doesn't love only those who are faithful and treat Him right. He doesn't truly love only those close to Him and ignores those who don't know Him. He doesn't remove His love from those who make themselves enemies. He loves all and He loves fully. "Steadfast love" is how our English translations of the Bible describe God's love. It does not fade or wane. It is a reliable, unstoppable constant. God's love is God's love regardless of the disposition of the object of this love.

God's love is not reasonable and measured. God might be described as loving with reckless abandon without a thought to cost or consequences. It defies human logic and common sense. God's love is selfless because God in His very being is love.

And possibly most important, God's love is not an emotion thing. God's love is an action thing. God's love spoke all creation into existence. And in that horrible, dark day that the pinnacle of creation—humanity—the object of God's love—turned against God and made God an enemy, God's love went into action with the promise of Messiah. God's love continued steadfast despite rejection, faithlessness, disobedience and outright rebellion through the centuries and finally God's love became manifest in the person and work of Jesus Christ. What

we see in Him is a love above and beyond us. Totally selfless, totally sacrificial, totally unbounded, unqualified and unyielding, determined to be innocently cursed by sin unto death so that we deservedly cursed and unloving of God would be saved. God's loving action is to die for the creation that hates Him.

It is this unfathomable love that brings us to repentance. Yes, there is guilt of sin and fear of punishment in the mix. But more so the proclaimed truth of God's love in Christ calls us to repentance. *"Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster."*

God's mercy in the Gospel proclaimed is somewhat like that of a parent calling a child home for dinner. It's good. It's full of the promise of blessing. Despite the dirt and grime accumulated in the activities of the day, a feast is waiting and served by the one who loves us and wants what is best for us.

Likewise, our God calls us. Though our sins be many, He has given Himself that we might receive that which is best for us—Jesus Christ, the bread of life, that is, forgiveness, life and salvation.

In a way, this dichotomy of love is evidenced in Jesus' exhortation today: *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

You can be satisfied with the treasure of Valentines love—a measured, qualified, ever-shifting emotional thing that endures in the best case until death. This is a thing of the fallen world where love is stained by sin and under a curse. Or you can follow the Gospel call to the

enduring, steadfast, unconquerable love of God in Christ which takes your sin and endures through the grave to life in this love forever!

Not really much of a choice, is it?

Thankfully, this call to grace is daily yours in Holy Baptism. It's yours whenever God's Word written on your heart catches you in your sin and you turn to God in repentance. Steadfast love of God is your in Christ, and in Christ it is forgiveness.

Tonight this call is made a little more graphic in our ritual of the ashes. The worthlessness of love of this life is made clear in "From dust you came and to dust you shall return." Yet the enduring promise of God is upon you not in the Valentines symbol of a heart, but in the symbol of God's enduring action loving of you in Christ's cross on your forehead. It doesn't mean you are dying. It means Jesus Christ loves you to death. Repent, and believe this good news.