

February 14, 2018 – Ash Wednesday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; Matthew 6:1-6;16-21

Ash Wednesday Valentines

Earlier this week my daughter said to me, “Sorry mom, but this is just a bad day to begin Lent.” Of course she was referring to the fact, of which you are no doubt aware, that this year the first day of Lent, today, Ash Wednesday, is also Valentine’s Day. I found it interesting that my daughter’s remark seemed to imply I had some influence on this, or perhaps was to blame for it. Though I am a pastor, it had nothing to do with me. Sorry, Ruth. It has to do with the date of Easter, which, unlike the date of Valentine’s Day, changes. Easter, of course, is always a Sunday, but the date depends on a complicated formula. Even though I am a pastor, I always have to look this up—and I must confess the formula still does not make the date immediately clear, as it states: Easter falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the March equinox. Right. So after you get that, you can get the date for Ash Wednesday by counting backwards forty days, not including Sundays, which usually puts you somewhere in February, often in the middle of it. But then as further complicating factors, February has a different number of days every four years. And in any given month the fourteenth will fall on a Wednesday only once every seven years. All of which is to say, the confluence of these two days does not occur that often. The last time was in 1945. You might not have been alive then, but you are living it now this year, right here, about to receive ashes, and reflect on all the ways we fail, on the way all our bodies will fail us some day, all of this on a day that features significant amounts of sugar (maybe there is a relationship there).

For people of different ages, in various ways, this confluence seems bad. For children, for instance. I was telling our seminary students about how here at our church, on Wednesdays in Lent the Girl Scout troop troops over here from the Gym, and join us for worship, including on Ash Wednesday. (Good to see you Girl Scouts!) Hearing about this, the seminary student made an almost reflexive cringe, picturing these young girls kneeling and being told “Remember you are dust...” That’s a different sentiment than what is found on the lighthearted cards children exchanged today, on Valentines with cartoon characters or superheroes, or something cute, like squirrels kissing. You don’t find any of those in our readings for tonight, or in the Bible as a whole, Old Testament or the New. Undoubtedly, many of the people in the Bible were characters, many had eccentricities, some had special talents—which is to say they aren’t cartoons, or superheroes, they are human, faulty and frail as humans are, as Ash Wednesday reminds us we all are. And animals in the Bible? No kissing squirrels. I don’t even think there’s a single kitten. When animals get mentioned in scripture, they’re less adorable, and more likely to swarm, or creep, or roar, or be something to eat, or not eat, depending on if the animal is clean or unclean, neither of which sound exactly appetizing.

That’s not the kind of attention to food and dining that Valentine’s Day brings to mind, not for people who are of a dating age, which seems the other option for February 14th: fun stuff for kids or dates for adults. But romance is also not something in large supply in the Bible. This reality always comes up often for me when I am doing pre-marital counseling. As I meet with people who are going to be married, we talk about the wedding service and which Bible readings might be included in it. The Bible is a big book, there are many verses and stories to choose from, but there are not that many that are all that romantic. It’s true that the Old Testament has a couple love poems. Some of them are even a bit steamy once you wade through the ancient— weird—metaphors, but even those are a far cry from what’s usually included with a dozen roses.

The Bible is not unaware of grown up relationships, but a good amount of Biblical coupling can be best described, in PG terms, as cautionary.

Despite all of this, I think Valentine's Day is not a bad day to begin Lent. February 14th is not a bad day for Ash Wednesday, and I don't think this, just because I'm a pastor. I'll bet that you also heard tonight's readings a little differently, these readings that we always hear on Ash Wednesday, I think they sound a little different on February 14th, when we hear God say, "Return to me with all your heart." And "Rend your hearts and not your clothing." For God is "abounding in steadfast love." Perhaps today, we sing a little differently, "Create in me a clean heart... according to your steadfast love." And we ponder in another way, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

The Bible may not have chocolate, or candlelight dinners, but it is chock full of love. On this day it is especially clear that Christian faith has much to say about hearts, about how hearts can be broken, and who can repair them. The ritual practices of this day can remind us of this, that far beyond the limited sort of love often sold in stores, probably already on discount now, far beyond that is the priceless, steadfast, abounding, expansive, everlasting love of God.

And so it is fitting, this evening, that this congregation should include Girl Scouts and grown ups, people of all ages, young and old, fitting and in keeping with the first reading, from Joel, that this solemn assembly includes the aged, and the children, even infants. And lovers, too—bridegroom and bride, as the first readings says, and priests and ministers of the Lord. We come forward, all of us, people of all ages, to receive the ashes on our foreheads, to be reminded we are dust.

And as we do, we are reminded of creation. It was dust, the Bible says, that God used to create humans, this creation story calling to mind an artist modelling with clay, a description both tactile and tender, even intimate. And even before that, in another angle on creation, the Bible says that when God made the world, when God made human beings, God said, "It is good." And just after that, God says, "Go and be creative, be fruitful and multiply," or in less PG terms, go make love.

Remember you are dust, remember who made you, and who loves you: God made you, and God hates nothing God made, as we hear in the Prayer of the Day for Ash Wednesday, God hates nothing God made. God made us good, out of goodness, because God's goodness is so great it cannot be contained but creatively overflows, is expressed in creation, in the earth, in all that swarms in air and sea, plants, and animals, and people, too. It is good. The creation is good. So too are humans, God says. And we say it, too. We say it, even on this day on which we confess human frailty, sin. This is part of confession, this is the very point of it: that we fail to embody the goodness for which God has created us.

And so God recreates us, remakes us, that we may hear joy and gladness, that the broken body may rejoice, as Psalm 51 says—that most penitential psalm, always heard on Ash Wednesday, that psalm affirms that God does not despise us and our broken hearts, God desires to restore us. This is the very heart of Lent! That in Christ, in experiencing all of human life, from birth and even unto death, in Jesus the Christ, God says I love you. If in creation, God says, I love you, in the cross God says, I love you even more.

And so even you are fasting today, do not look dismal, as today's gospel reminds us. Especially when Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine's Day, as it will again in 2024, and then, would you believe, again in 2029, then and today, Ash Wednesday is a good day to think about love.