

Joel 2:1-2,12-17  
Psalm 103  
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

It can't have escaped anyone's notice that this year Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine's Day. And they are in direct conflict with each other. What a revolting development! How are we to observe both simultaneously? We associate Valentine's Day with flowers and candy...usually chocolate. It's a celebration day filled with expressions of love. And then there's Ash Wednesday that we associate with repentance and remorse and the beginning of 40 days of fasting and giving up guilty pleasures...usually chocolate. It's not celebratory. There are no flowers on the altar and we are reminded for 40 days how powerful temptation is and how weak we are. We are mere mortals. Valentine's Day lifts us up and makes us feel warm and fuzzy and on top of the world. Ash Wednesday leaves us feeling humbled and diminished. How could these two days fall together and be celebrated at the same time?

Well, let's take a closer look. These special days may be more related and mutually supportive than we first imagine. Where I grew up...in the South...which I expect all of you have already figured out just by listening to me talk...we have a quaint expression for people we care about deeply. It's usually reserved for the women in the South, but men can use this expression, too. It's not unusual to hear someone say with great affection. "I just love her to death" or "I just love him to death." We all know that saying such a thing means that someone is a favorite with us. But what does it really mean? Does it mean I'm going to love you 'til I die? Does it mean I love you so much I'm going to smother you until you die? Does it mean that I'm going to love you until you die? It could mean any of these things. So hold that thought.

As we begin the season of Lent, we are once more reminded of our own sadness and regret about how far short we fall of being worthy to be loved. We look at the 40 days that lie ahead for us as a time of both opportunity and deprivation. It's a time when we are going to try to change how we do things...we're going to repent. We're going to 'turn around' and see Jesus and embrace him...even though we know we are unworthy. We're going to love him to death! We're going to make him a favorite!

This day marks the beginning of Lent which is that time when we watch Jesus work his way to the cross. It begins with his temptation in the desert...those 40 days when Satan tried to get

him to turn away from God and give in to all the tempting possibilities that were placed in front of him. We can't possibly do what Jesus did. We know that we give into temptation on a regular basis for all kinds of reasons and the season of Lent brings all of that into focus for us.

Tonight we will get ashes put on our foreheads with the reminder that 'dust we are and to dust we shall return.' We humans seem to need to be reminded of our mortality on a regular basis. Most of us live our lives as if we had all the time in the world. The gospel lesson tonight tells us not to practice our piety before others so that we can be seen by them. Sometimes Christians really struggle with the ash cross on the forehead as if it were a public display of our piety.

It's not. It's a public sign of humility and the acknowledgement of our dependence.

The mark on the forehead is an ancient practice for slaves whose foreheads were marked with the symbol of their owners. That mark on the forehead was readily identifiable and the owner could be notified if the slave were to get lost or be injured or more likely had run away. The cross of ash we receive on our foreheads tonight is reminiscent of the cross of holy oil at our baptism when we were marked with a cross and sealed as one of Christ's own forever. It's a sign of ownership We can't escape that. These ashes on our foreheads are a reminder of who we are and whose we are. We are slaves to Christ. We are His. We belong to him. We are in a relationship with him and he with us. And our relationships are the treasure that we store up in heaven...the relationships we have with the people in our lives and the relationship with have with Jesus.

And he loves us to death...literally.

These ashes are a reminder of what Jesus did for us in going to his death in order to save us. Yes, we are mortal, but Jesus took on all our sins and our mortality and hung on the cross so that we could go with Him into eternal life. He said he was going to prepare a place for us in his Father's house. And we know that Jesus keeps his promises.

It's hard for us to fathom that kind of love...the kind of love that literally loves us until and through death. We know that we are unworthy. It is on this day that we focus on all our own shortcomings...all the ways we fail our Lord, Jesus Christ and ourselves and those we love. We've been claimed by him as one of his own. We can't get there on our own merits. We can't walk into the Kingdom of God because we've been good people. No matter how good we are, we will still fall short. Our need for Jesus is all-consuming. On Ash Wednesday we acknowledge that need. We stand before God with the cross of ashes on our foreheads and we are reminded

that we are mortal and that we are unworthy of this most magnificent gift that Jesus has given us.

As we walk through these 40 days of Lent, let all of us remember that whatever we choose to do to amend our lives...to repent of our failings...to follow Jesus to the cross...Jesus will be there waiting for us with open arms. He loves us unconditionally. He loves us when we don't deserve it. He loves us without question and without reservation. He gave up his own life to pave the way for us into life eternal.

Jesus has given us the ultimate Valentine. He loves us to death. And the ashes on our foreheads mean we love him back...as mortal and unworthy as we are.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.