

## Ashes and Valentines

**Date:** February 14, 2018    **Place:** Lakewood UMC    **Occasion:** Ash Wednesday  
**Texts:** Joel 2:1-2, 12-17    **Themes:** Love, Grace, Disciplines

Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday: what a unique opportunity for us to experience both of them on the same day. The two days really have more in common than what you might think. As I thought about what I wanted to share with you this evening, I realized the two days actually have a lot in common.

At the core of both of these special days is the concept of love. On Valentine's Day we generally think of the love between two people – two lovers if you will. On Ash Wednesday, we remember the love that God has for us, how that special love relationship has been broken by sin, and how God continues to woo God's people, inviting us to love Him with our whole being, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

On Ash Wednesday we place ashes on our foreheads to remind us of our mortality, and also as a sign of repentance. The word repentance literally means *to turn around*. If sin is turning our backs on God, or turning away from God's ways, then repentance is returning to our original love.

In the passage from Joel we read these words: "Return to me with all your heart..." (Sounds like a plea of love to me) "...with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments." (There is that allusion to the heart again. Puts me in mind of Valentine's Day.

What is the prophet Joel asking the people of God to do? He's asking the people of Israel, and by extension he is asking us to sincerely return to the love of the Lord, with expressions of our love. Empty rituals, like tearing one's clothing, aren't going to win over God's heart, but change of heart will renew the love relationship between God and his people again.

Notice how the Lord will respond in verse 13. “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.” That sounds like the New Testament God who was revealed in Jesus Christ. God is not pleased to be angry, or to shame his people. God simply wants our love – for him and for others. And when we demonstrate that turning of the heart, God responds with grace, love and acceptance.

My friends, the spiritual life is primarily a love relationship. God is the Divine Lover who created the world for the expressed purpose of loving it. You and I were created to respond to God’s love, and to share that love with one another. God is looking for healthy, loving relationships.

When John Wesley offered three simple rules for the Methodists, he encouraged them to do no harm; to do good; and to stay in love with God. At least that’s how Bishop Reuben Job interpreted Wesley’s words. And I’m glad he interpreted Wesley that way, because “attend to the ordinances of God” sounds so stuffy. But *staying in love with God*, that I get.

In the passage from Matthew, Jesus offers us some advice on the spiritual disciplines we are called to practice: almsgiving, prayer and fasting. He essentially said, “Don’t parade your good deeds around town. Do them secretly; God knows what you’re up to.”

Our spiritual journey is a love affair, if you will, between you and God. The good works we do are not meant to impress other people. Do it to impress other people, and God’s not impressed. Your expressions of love are meant for the Lord, not for the opinion of others.

So when you fast and when you pray, do it in secret. And when you give alms or do charity, don’t brag about it. Do your good deeds quietly. And when it comes to possessions, don’t think of them as your true treasures. Material things are so temporary. Our love for God and others is our true treasure, and Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there will

your heart be also.” (Mt. 6:21) So think about what kind of Valentine God would like to receive.

Lent is a time for us to renew our vow of love to the Lord. In the beatitudes Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see the Lord.” Lent is a time of purification, purification of the heart – so that we might keep the two most important commandments: to love the Lord our God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength; and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

I invite you to join me on the Lenten journey. Find one of the spiritual disciplines that you feel drawn to practice, and commit yourself to doing it. Let it be your love gift, your Valentine to the Lord. Remember, we’re not trying to *earn* God’s love. We’re simply offering God our hearts, that God may have them and use them for holy purposes. It’s an opportunity to fall in love with our God and Savior Jesus Christ, all over again.

In human relationships, between husbands and wives, between boyfriends and girlfriends, between intimate lovers, the spark of love often fades due to lack of attention. The same thing can happen in our relationship with God. Lent is a time to turn around, get connected and fall in love with God all over again.

I really like that understanding of repentance – as a turning around, because too often we think of repentance as making ourselves feel guilty, piling the shame upon ourselves. I think for too long Christianity has promoted a shame-filled understanding of grace, that if we shame ourselves, somehow God will be pleased with that and then be willing to love us once again.

But that’s not the God of grace that I have come to know. We need not personally shame ourselves in order to feel worthy of being forgiven. God is not the author of shame and doesn’t want us to shame ourselves.

God love us and wants us to love Him and to love others. Yes, we need to feel a certain degree of guilt when we have done wrong. We confess it and we are forgiven. Then we need to accept God's forgiveness, acceptance of us. We don't need to continually berate ourselves.

The good news of Jesus Christ is grace. God is pleased to see us turn around. Like the good father in the story of the prodigal son, God is delighted to restore the relationship.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, "shame *off* of you." Turn around, your Divine Lover, the One who created you and loves you beyond measure, is waiting for your love. Repent. Turn around. And show God how much you love him. Happy Valentine's Day. God cared enough to send His very best, he gives us Jesus Christ. Amen? Amen!