

Wednesday, February 14, 2018

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

What are we to make of the fact that this year, Ash Wednesday coincides with Valentine's Day? Two holidays that are, in many ways, complete opposites. Ash Wednesday, a sacred and holy day; and Valentine's Day, while based on commemoration of the life of a saint (or maybe multiple saints), is in our time a decidedly secular celebration. Ash Wednesday, emphasizing sin and death; and Valentine's Day, emphasizing love and life. Ash Wednesday, emphasizing fasting and penance; and Valentine's Day, emphasizing feasting and merriment. To be sure, there is no connection between the two. Occurring on the same day is purely coincidence. Valentine's Day is a fixed date – February 14th. Ash Wednesday, on the other hand, is determined based on a formula involving phases of the moon. Easter is determined as being the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after the Vernal Equinox. The beginning of Lent, Ash Wednesday, is then determined by backing up 46 days – 40 days not counting Sundays (which incidentally are not part of Lent). So the fact that these two days occur today is merely a chance convergence of our solar calendar and the ancient Jewish lunar calendar. Something that last occurred 73 years ago, and will occur again in a mere six years.

While there is no theological significance to this convergence, clergy are wont to try to find theological meaning in such things. So as we begin our annual commemoration of Lent on this particular Ash Wednesday, let us use the themes of love and commitment symbolized by Valentine's Day as a touchstone for our Ash Wednesday practices and our Lenten disciplines.

As we see in our liturgy for today – in the particular prayers, readings, and music that are appointed – the Ash Wednesday commemoration has a twin emphasis on sin and death. And along with sin comes the themes of fasting and penance. This is the one day of the liturgical year where we are completely honest about the realities of sin and death. Yes, we touch on these subjects at other times of the year, and particularly during Lent. But it tends to be in a gentler, even oblique way. Yet, on Ash Wednesday, we are bold to proclaim our recognition that we are sinners. As we raise our voices with the Psalmist:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness;
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

Wash me through and through from my wickedness
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

Against you only have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight.

On Ash Wednesday, we remind ourselves of our mortality, as ashes are placed on our foreheads with the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The dust of death to which we shall return is the dust from which God created life in us in the first place.

These reminders – of our sinfulness and our mortality – are they not actually acts of love? Acts of love toward our God? These are tangible reminders of the most intimate relationship that any of us have. That we are beloved of God. That God created us. That God loves us. That God continually seeks to be in relationship with us. In remembering our sinfulness, we remind ourselves that it is not God who has turned away from us, but it is we who have turned away from our God. And we open ourselves to receive the forgiveness that God is more than ready to bestow. We open ourselves to be reconciled with the One who loves us more than anyone else possibly could. God continually reaches across the divide of sin that separates us from him. On this day, we reach out, accepting his hand of forgiveness. On this day, we reach out, embracing the new life God offers us.

The fact that we symbolize this recognition of our own sinfulness, our own mortality; that we are penitent; that we symbolize our own readiness to accept forgiveness and new life; though ashes made in the sign of the cross is no accident. Ashes in the form of a cross made on our foreheads are a sign of who we are and whose we are. In the midst of our own sinfulness and mortality we bear the sign of the cross. We wear the sign of the cross as a reminder that on the cross, Christ, though without sin, took on our sin in order to destroy it. Destroying that which separates us from God, that we might be forever reconciled to God. We wear the sign of the cross as a reminder that on the cross, Christ, Son of the eternal God and thereby himself eternal, made himself subject to death, in order to destroy death. Destroying death that we might forever live with God. These are the greatest acts of love ever performed in the history of the world. Wearing the sign of the cross is our sign of acceptance of these gifts of love.

The season of Lent, which begins today, is the traditional time of preparation designed to heighten our commemoration of Holy Week, marking the death and burial of Jesus; and of his resurrection at Easter. We traditionally do this through the Lenten disciplines of almsgiving, prayers, and fasting – the three disciplines mentioned by Jesus in today's Gospel reading. The choice of these disciplines is no accident. These are the traditional acts of Jewish religious obligation that were viewed as being integral to one's relationship with God. As Jesus notes, these were meant to be private devotions, not public demonstrations of one's piety. These acts are particular ways of demonstrating and being in relationship with God.

Almsgivings – giving money to the poor – or in a broader sense, giving one's time or money to benefit those in need, is a means of expressing concern for those who are of particular concern to God – the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the prisoner, the widowed, the orphaned, the marginalized. Giving alms and working with and for those in need is a tangible way of demonstrating love not only for those whom God loves – our neighbors – but also of demonstrating love for God himself.

Prayers is simply communicating with, spending time with, God. It is an expression of the desire to be with God. It is an attempt to be in relationship with God by expressing our most intimate

thoughts and desires directly to God; by expressing our love for God; and by making ourselves available to receive God's love.

Fasting is about intentionally abstaining from those things that might get in the way of our relationship with God. Those things that we may use to dull the pain of not being in full relationship with God. Those things that we might use to fill the void, in feeble attempts to replace relationship with God. Fasting takes many forms. But at its core, fasting is meant to be a reminder that all our needs are ultimately met by God. And to be a demonstration of that realization to God. To be open to accepting what God has to offer.

These disciplines – to increase one's giving to the poor, to increase one's attention to prayer, and to decrease one's focus on the self – are meant to be our acts of love and devotion to the One who first loved us. Our acts of love and devotion to the One who loves us no matter who we are or what we may do. Our acts of love that serve to open us up to be more present to God in our daily lives.

Despite its focus on sin and death, on penance and fasting, Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent that follow are meant to be an act of love. This day and this season are about reminding ourselves, through penance and acts of devotion, that we are God's beloved children. That we are so in need of God's love and mercy. This day and this season are a recognition that despite our sin, God loves us so much and continually seeks to be in relationship with us. And that one of the ways he demonstrates that love is to forgive our sins. Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent are a recognition that despite the fact that these mortal bodies will die, we are assured, through the love of God manifest in Jesus Christ, that we shall have eternal life. This is God's commitment to us, demonstrated by the ultimate gifts of love, forgiveness, and eternal life. This day and this season are about letting God love us through these gifts, and even more about us expressing our commitment to God by embracing and receiving these gifts of love that God freely offers.