

Wednesday, February 14, 2024

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/682387060772117>

(Sermon begins at about 18:20)

“Our Valentine Gift to God”

Because of the way that the date for Ash Wednesday is calculated (determined by the variable date of Easter), there are 36 possible dates for Ash Wednesday—February 4th through March 10th. With that many possible dates, it’s pretty rare that Ash Wednesday falls on any given date, let alone on February 14th—Valentine’s Day. In fact, it only happened three times during the 20th century; and will only happen three times this century. It already happened once in 2018; it is happening this year; and will happen again in 2029.

This confluence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day creates a bit of a disconnect as we try to hold the two in our hearts and minds; as some try to find a place for both in their lives. Ash Wednesday being a religious commemoration focused on the sorrow at our sinfulness, with the need for penance. Valentine’s Day being a secular celebration focused on the joys of love. The practices associated with Ash Wednesday (and the Lenten season that follows) being almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The practices associated with Valentine’s Day being the giving of flowers, cards, and chocolates. Ash Wednesday being viewed as a time of abstinence in many forms, and Valentine’s Day being associated with extravagance in many forms.

How do we reconcile these two disparate commemorations that do not seem to have anything in common? Not that we necessarily need to. Although I would argue—and the Church would undoubtedly concur—that these two commemorations, one religious and one secular, while having different tones, do indeed share common themes. Love and the celebration of relationships. Specifically, our relationship with God. All our readings for Ash Wednesday focus, directly or indirectly, on God’s love for his people; on our relationship with God; and how we, in turn, go about demonstrating our love for God.

We see this most clearly in broad strokes as conveyed in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. The opening verse clearly states our goal as followers of Christ: “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” To be reconciled, meaning to coexist in harmony, to make or show to be compatible. To bring our lives into alignment with, to be compatible with, what God desires for us. As Paul goes on to say, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” That all God has done through Jesus Christ was with the express purpose that we might become the righteousness of God. Righteousness here meaning living a moral life in alignment with God’s laws, so that we are brought into right relationship with God. Paul then goes on to give examples of how he has sought to live into this goal of right relationship with God, in terms of hardships he endured for the sake of the Gospel, and the virtues that are needed to live into right relationship. Recognizing that for us humans, it is not always easy, yet is willingly done out of love for the

One who first loved us. The One who created us, nurtures us, sustains us. The One who willingly gave his Son so that we might be saved from sin and death and thereby be brought into the right relationship he desires to have with us. Because of God's love for us and all that he has done for us, we seek to love him in return.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus himself offers some ancient practices for demonstrating our love for God: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Almsgiving is willingly giving of our resources—be they material resources or our time and talents—to work on behalf of those who are of greatest concern to God. Particularly recognizing God's preference for the poor, for those who are sick and infirmed, for those who are marginalized or outcast. Out of love for God, we willingly take God's concerns as our own. Just as anyone in relationship with another cares for and is concerned with those things that are of concern to the one they love. Just as those who are in relationship willingly seek to share in one another's interests, so too, acts of almsgiving are a way of participating and sharing in God's interests and of making God's interests our own.

Prayer is, quite simply, communicating with God. Sharing our thoughts and concerns with God, and being open to hearing what God has to communicate to us. We know that open and honest communications is critical to any relationship. Our relationship with God is no different. Intentional time of being present to God, of sharing what is on your hearts and minds, and listening for the ways God shares of himself with you and you alone, is critical to nurturing the unique relationship that exists between you and God.

Fasting is generally thought of as abstaining from all or some food or drink for a set period of time. This is a common religious practice, particularly as a means of penance. Although, in a broader context, fasting is abstaining from any specified thing—be it food, drink, or activity—for a particular time. The intent is not to view fasting as a punishment, but rather as a means of removing whatever it is that may get in the way of relationship with God. That removing a particular thing or activity from one's life is meant to raise awareness of how some things may hinder our relationship with God. To create space to fill the void created by fasting from the item by focusing on relationship with God. Sometimes this even loops in the other practices of almsgiving and prayer. That in those times of fasting, if time is freed up in one's schedule, that time can be used for prayer. That in abstaining from something, particularly if there is a cost savings, the money saved can be used for almsgiving.

Of course, Jesus opens his discussion of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting by cautioning that, while these are all acts of piety, our intent in engaging in these acts is key. Specifically, we need to "beware of practicing [our] piety before others in order to be seen by them." That these acts of piety are not about showing others how devout or religious we are. Rather, these are acts which we do in the service of God, as a means of strengthening our relationship with God. The refrain Jesus uses throughout is those who engage in these actions should do so for the right reason. That when done in solidarity with those for whom God is concerned and in right relationship with God, such actions will be rewarded. The reward being in the joy of strengthened relationship with God and with others. Unlike those who engage in these acts of piety so as to be seen by others and praised by their fellows. Falling short of the goal of right relationship with God.

The Old Testament reading from Isaiah provides additional insight into how we are to engage in our acts of piety. And why we do these things. The oracle from Isaiah starts off condemning those who engage in acts of piety for the wrong reason. Condemning those who engage in acts of piety, but who do not have a change in heart and mind when it comes to their relationship with God or with others. What is important is the motivation behind our acts of piety. As God conveys to Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Put in a broader context, God is not concerned with meaningless or hypocritical acts of piety that do not produce results in alignment with his purposes. Rather, he is concerned with those actions which make a change in the lives of those of particular concern to him. That our acts of piety are to be aligned with God's purposes and engaged in as a means of furthering and strengthening our relationship with God's beloved children, which in turn furthers and strengthens our relationship with God.

This is ultimately what our Lenten devotions and practices of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are meant to be about. To make space in our own lives to connect with and engage in those concerns that align with God's concerns. To make space in our lives to connect with God on a deeper and more meaningful level. All to express, celebrate, and deepen the love we have for God and which God has for us.

So, what we do on Ash Wednesday and throughout the forty days of Lent is our Valentine's gift to God. Practices and disciplines that express and celebrate our love for him in specific and meaningful ways. Recognizing that what we do out of love for him is a pale comparison to God's demonstration of love for us which will be revealed at the end of this Lenten journey.