

Ash Wednesday

St. Valentine was a third-century Italian bishop put to death for the faith on this date, February 14th. At least we think so. We don't know too much about him. The English poet Chaucer believed that birds chose their mates on this day each year, and that may have started the tradition for lovers calling each other "My valentine."

Valentine's Day has become big business in the United States. Couples are expected to spend considerably on gifts, food, drink and chocolates. On the plus side, love is good, and so is any day that encourages people to express their love. Splurging on Valentine's Day attempts to show the immensity of one's love. If you don't spend a lot on the person you love, they may wonder if they really are the person you love. Love is beautiful, but love is also dangerous; it can seduce us to make poor choices, spend money foolishly, waste time with the wrong people, and squander affection.

It's weird having Ash Wednesday on Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day is about excess, Ash Wednesday is about privation. In the gospel Jesus promotes the benefits of fasting, almsgiving and prayer. Many of us accept these three disciplines grudgingly: We may start Lent with a fast, but we don't keep it up. We may intend to give alms to the poor, but only in a dose that will not hurt our own pleasures. We want to pray to God, but not if it takes very long or gets in the way of other activities. Lent invites us into the mystery of less, not the mystery of more. Lent is about eating less, drinking less, owning less, being distracted less - all the while reaping the benefits of a more focused spiritual life. Quite honestly, it is hard to promote the virtues of self-restraint on Valentine's Day. But you're here today because you think Lent matters.

Whether you are looking for a party or for piety, you have more success when you're not alone. When everyone in your household abstains from meat on the Fridays of Lent, the discipline unites you. When you contribute to the parish, when you volunteer at a soup kitchen, even when you go to the gym to improve your health - when other people join you in the sacrifices you make, you build up a community of support. When Valentine's Day falls on Ash Wednesday, you can grow close to another person not just by the pleasures you seek, but by the pleasures you decline. Pleasures can pull two people together, but so can sacrifice.

Psalms 51, which we sing today, is quite personal: "Have mercy on me, O God.... Cleanse me from my sin. My transgressions, truly I know them.... Do not cast me away from your presence." These are the prayers of an individual repenting from sin. But our refrain was more communal: "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned." Sin separates us from one another, but sorrow makes us one.

This year Ash Wednesday gives us a weird way to celebrate Valentine's Day. We become aware both of someone else's love and of our own sin. We grow closer both in celebration and in sacrifice. We rejoice both in human love and in God's promise. We use both bright red hearts and dull grey ashes. We seek God's mercy even as we marvel at God's love.

Wednesday, February 14, 2018