

Love is stronger than death

Wednesday, Feb. 14, 2018

Ash Wednesday

The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

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The calendar has delivered up some interesting juxtapositions for us this year. Ash Wednesday coincides with Valentine's Day, and Easter Sunday will fall on April Fool's Day! This is a fairly rare occurrence; the last time it happened was 73 years ago, in 1945. I wouldn't want to let such a rare opportunity pass us by, so this is your fair warning that you might want to expect some April Fool's jokes on Easter this year... and for today, it seemed worth taking a little time to reflect on what Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day have to say to one another.

At the onset, these two holidays seem to be complete opposites. Ash Wednesday is a fast day, and Valentine's Day is a day we associate with chocolate and sweets. While the Roman Catholic tradition has many fast days, in the Episcopal Church there are only two formally observed fasts – Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. If you're only going to fast two days out of the year – fasting being defined as eating less, denying yourself, eliminating extras or superfluous foods from your diet, especially meat and sweets – it seems pretty ironic for one of those fast days to fall on a day when every store in the country expects us to buy and eat a lot of chocolate!

Then there's the fact that Valentine's Day is a day traditionally associated with love, something we generally view as positive and happy, while Ash Wednesday is a day associated with death, something we generally view as negative and sad. So what connection could these two days possibly have? What might they have to say to one another?

Well, it's interesting to remember that Valentine's Day is actually SAINT Valentine's Day, an official church observance of the death date of one of the early Christian martyrs. So right away we have a connection between the two days that most people in the wider culture wouldn't make – St. Valentine's Day is actually a commemoration of a death – not so inappropriate on Ash Wednesday, a day we reflect on our mortality.

Very little is known about who "St. Valentine" was, beyond the fact that he was a priest – or maybe even a bishop – who lived in the 3rd century in Italy and was martyred on February 14 in the year 269. None of the legends associated with Valentine are historically verifiable, but some stories say that he was executed for refusing to deny Christ before Roman Emperor Claudius II, or for trying to convert Claudius to Christianity. Legend has it that they beat him with rocks and stones, and when that failed to kill him, they beheaded him. Perhaps the only legend that links him with romantic love in any way is a story that he used to perform marriages for Christian couples so the men would not be drafted into military service and sent to war.

Most sources agree that February 14, the day of his martyrdom, wasn't connected with the notion of romantic or courtly love in any meaningful way until 14th century England, when Geoffrey Chaucer referred to St. Valentine's Day as a special day for lovers in his work *Parlement of Foules*. Some scholars think Chaucer downright made this up, since there is no historical evidence that there was any previous connection between the two. But the connection took off, and in the seven centuries since Chaucer's time, St. Valentine's Day has become synonymous with romantic love – not just in England, but around the world.

And although our modern-day expressions of Valentine's Day might not seem to have much connection with the call to solemn repentance and reminder of our mortality that we receive on Ash Wednesday, there are in fact some interesting ways in which romantic love has profound connections with both repentance and mortality.

First, perhaps nothing drives us to repentance more effectively than romantic love. Intimate relationships have the power to make us aware of our shortcomings and motivate us to work to change them in very powerful ways. In the movie "As Good As It Gets," Melvin Udall, a self-absorbed eccentric writer, develops a crush on a waitress at his favorite restaurant, but he isn't making much progress with her because he continues to say and do ridiculously inappropriate things. Finally, in a moment

of exasperation, Carol asks that he pay her a compliment. Melvin's response is that ever since she told him off and declared she would never be interested in him, he started taking the medications that his psychiatrist had prescribed, medications he had previously been resistant to take. She looks at him incredulously and says, "I don't quite get how that's supposed to be a compliment for me." To which he replies, "You make me want to be a better man." Romantic love, at its best, does this for us. It drives us to repentance and amendment of life as we are motivated to try to be a better person for the sake of the one we love.

Secondly, romantic love makes us profoundly aware of our mortality. When we love someone that deeply and completely, we are all the more aware of the possibility of losing them. Marriage or an intimate partnership – and the relationship with any children that come out of it – are the only relationships in our lives that innately demand that we consider what will happen to the other person when we die, that we make provisions to provide for them when we are gone. The Song of Solomon, that great romantic love poem in the Hebrew Bible, speaks of the fierce power of love by saying that love is "strong as death," because only death has the power to separate two devoted and committed lovers from one another. People often choose to have that passage read at weddings, where they make a solemn vow before God to love and be faithful to their partner "until we are parted by death."

The unfortunate part about what the secular celebration of Valentine's Day has become is that it doesn't leave much room for people who are not in romantic relationships. It can be an extremely difficult day for people who are single, divorced, or widowed, as they watch the rest of the world around them celebrating what they don't have.

But the world's great spiritual traditions all teach that romantic love, as wonderful as it can be, is not the highest form of love that there is. The greatest love of all, the love of God, is available to ALL of us, no matter what our relationship status may be.

In our Christian tradition, the church has always held up singleness as a respected and desirable state, perhaps even more so than marriage because it allows someone to be entirely devoted to God. While we acknowledge the ways in which an intimate relationship can be a tangible expression of God's love for us, we also recognize that it can also be a distraction from our spiritual life, which is why the tradition of celibate and single clergy, monks, and nuns developed. If secular Valentine's Day makes single people feel that they are lacking in some way, the church affirms that each individual is deeply valued and beloved of God and needs no other person to make them complete.

While the church's emphasis on Ash Wednesday is normally pretty stark, the fact that Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine's Day this year reminds us that "remember

that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” is not the end of the story for us as Christians. The most powerful part of the Christian story is that love is not just as strong as death, as the Song of Solomon says, but stronger than death. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we know that love has the power to overcome even the grave itself. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans,

“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

That love is the love St. Valentine knew as a Christian, the love that made him willing to die for his faith, knowing that God’s love was stronger than death. That love is the ultimate love, the love of which human romantic love is but a mere shadow.

So as we remember our mortality this Ash Wednesday, let Valentine’s Day also remind us of the power of love to overcome death. We may all be destined to return to the dust, but as our funeral liturgy says, “even at the grave we make our song: alleluia, alleluia, alleluia” – because we know that God’s love is stronger than death.