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# **“Will You Be Mine? -- Love, God”**

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A Sermon By  
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

February 14, 2018  
Ash Wednesday  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Happy Valentine’s Day and happy Ash Wednesday! The last time Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day coincided was almost 75 years ago. It doesn’t happen often, and when it does, it may seem like a bit of a cosmic joke. A day when chocolates and sweets dominate the stores is also a day when many Christians choose to give up candy for the next 40-days. This day, marketed to celebrate sweethearts and love, is also a day we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. It is a day of levity and a day of solemnity. Because of these contradictions, the occurrence of Ash Wednesday on Valentine’s Day may seem like a bit of a faux pas on the part of our calendar. On the other hand, it presents an interesting coincidence for Christians to explore.

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the Lenten season, a period of intense preparation for the Easter and the mystery of Christ’s Resurrection. Traditionally, Lent was the season during which people had their final preparation to be baptized at Easter. Sinners, who had been excluded from the church, were reconciled and restored to the community. It was a season to remember mortality so that Christians might learn to rely more on God’s strength than on their own weakness. It was, and is, a period of self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial and penitence.

But here’s the thing: it is also a season of invitation. In today’s first reading, we hear the prophet Joel announce, “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart... rend your hearts and not your clothing.” God wants us to draw close to God. In the Hebrew tradition, the heart is the source of will and emotion; so to “rend” or tear one’s heart is to go beyond external gestures of penance and open one’s self fully to God. In order to be fully open, we have to be honest about our shortcomings, the times we’ve missed the mark, the times we sinned and separated ourselves from the love of God. We do this, not as a practice in and of itself, but because in doing so, we are able to draw nearer to our God, the creator and lover of our souls.

And here’s where the coincidence of this season beginning on Valentine’s Day is interesting. Because Valentine’s Day is a day set-aside for lovers to reveal their adoration for a beloved. Valentine’s Day is a day when love is declared, when invitations of “Be Mine” are issued. And so, imagine this if you will, that today, on this Ash Valentine’s Day, God is saying to each of us, “be mine.” God is inviting each of us to be God’s Valentine. Today at the start of the Lenten season, we are reminded of God’s adoration for us, God’s beloved. Today we are invited, in a special way, to be in deeper relationship with God over these next 40-days.

Our scriptures today attest to this fact. Our Psalm proclaims, not once, but twice, that God’s love is abounding and steadfast. God’s love for us, the psalmist says, is firmly unwavering. It flourishes. No matter how many times we fall short. No matter how many times we fail. No matter how many times we get it wrong. No matter how many times we sin. God’s love is steadfast and abounds. God knows how we are made. God remembers that we are but dust. And still, that love abounds - unstoppable, unfaltering, unbreakable.

Over the next 40-days we'll be reminded of God's steadfast love for us through the gospels. For there, God's love has a body. God's love is incarnate. In Jesus, God revealed God's love in the most vulnerable and authentic way. Over these 40-days we will hear how Jesus healed, taught, had compassion and loved. We will hear how he was tested, betrayed, and ultimately how the powers and principalities of this world nailed him to a cross and stamped out the light of his life (or tried to). And at the end of these 40-days, we will hear again those words that rouse the heart and stir the soul. "When the Sabbath was over, on the first day of the week the women came to the tomb..." We will hear the rest of the story and we will be reminded, yet again, that nothing – NOTHING – can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even death.

My brother and sisters, Lent is an opportunity to enter into, or return to, right relationship with God. This season especially, we are invited to respond to God's call of "be mine." We are invited to fall more deeply in love with the One who loved us into being. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now if the day of salvation!" God longs for us now. In this very moment, God longs for us.

So let's see what happens if we are willing to say, "yes" to God. Let's see how God will change our hearts over this Lenten season if we are willing to accept God's invitation. There are many ways to say, "yes" to God. During Lent, we Christians have a tendency to intensify our spiritual lives. Some of us read the Bible more. Others pray and meditate. Some give up something enjoyable. Others take on something new. In theory, these practices help us to live more faithfully and engage more deeply with God. So do something. It doesn't matter you do, what matters is that you bring a willing heart and an openness to God. God will do the rest.

The last verse of our Gospel reading today states, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." I want to think about an alternative reading of this scripture, because if it's true for us, who are made in God's image, then perhaps this verse is also true for God. So listen to this scripture again, with a little twist, "where God's treasure is, there God's heart will be also." Friends, we are God's treasure and God's heart is with us. We are God's beloved, God's Valentines. Let us venture into more fully understanding the intense truthfulness of what that means this Lenten season by rending our hearts and opening ourselves to the Lord. We may be surprised what happens...

In just a few moments, you'll be invited to come forward and receive ashes on your forehead. This is an invitation as ancient as our tradition. As you receive the ashes, you will hear the words, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." In these sober words we remember our own mortality, even as we trust in God's grace. On your way to receive ashes, I invite you pause and take a token from the basket in the center aisle. The basket is full of heart tokens. Carry the heart token with you this Lent or place it somewhere you will see it daily. When you see it or touch it, I hope it will remind you that God loves you and nothing can stop God's steadfast abounding love, not even the ashes of mortality.

May your Lenten journey be meaningful. May it be a time to return to God in openness and faith. May it be a season of remembering who you are and who's you are. And may you know and feel the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.