

Ash Wednesday 2018
February 14, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The bookends of Lent are really easy to remember this year:

- Ash Wednesday is Valentine's Day.
- Easter is April Fool's Day.

When I pointed out the Valentine's Day connection to Pastor Mark he suggested I trace a heart instead of a cross on people's foreheads. I liked that.

After all, what's the point of Lent if not to be drawn closer to God's heart? If not to pause long enough to let God's love sink deeper into the soil of our souls? If not to carve out a spiritual niche, a place apart, in our more-than-busy lives to spend time with the Lord? If not to plot resting places on our journey, stop-overs, to gauge our progress on the pilgrimage of life, to check that the road we're traveling is the right one, that we're still on-track to reach our destination: heart union with God?

Think of a trip you've taken, repeatedly – a trip that's long enough to require stops along the way. If it's a car ride, I'll bet there are rest areas, gas stations, restaurants, that serve as landmarks for you: certain places you always pull off – to fill up the gas tank, use the restroom, grab a bite, stretch your legs, clear your head. Or if the trip you're thinking of is a long hike to a favorite destination, you probably have "the usual" places where you step off the path to enjoy some trail mix, take in the view, snap a few photos, catch a few rays, catch your breath along the Way. We all need spiritual resting places, too.

Much if not most of the world is going about its business today, oblivious to Ash Wednesday. For most people, the 40 days of Lent won't be any different than the other 325

days of the year. We pray that this season **will** be different for us, though. Not just because we'll gather for soup at Wednesday noon or Wednesday nights – not just because there aren't any fresh flowers on the altar or alleluia's in the air– not just because the paraments are purple and the crucifix is front and center. We pray this season will be different because we will devote time to marveling and incarnating “What Wondrous Love Is This.”

We can't “make” time to let God's love sink deeper into the soil of our souls... We can only **devote** time. Many of us will have to “repurpose” time to eliminate something non-essential from our overfilled schedules to **devote** more time to our Lord. It's probably going to be something “good” not “bad” that we choose to sideline for a while in order to clear head-room and heart-room for God to enter. (I don't think many of us are wasting time hanging out at the corner smoking cigarettes with the gang ☺, whiling away our time placing bets on the horses or passing the hours perusing porn.) There's got to be something on our schedule that's been good use of our time but not **as** good as dedicated time for the Holy Spirit to speak to us apart from the jabber of everyday life.

Prayer is one of the three legs of the Lenten tripod, the 3-legged stool of Lenten spiritual practice, that Jesus talks about in today's Gospel: **prayer, fasting, almsgiving.**

- Prayer: silent communion, 2-way communication with the God who loves us.
- Fasting: foregoing creature pleasures in order to experience deepened hunger for the God who loves us.
- Almsgiving: heartfelt, generous gifts, lovingly given, a faithful sharing of the blessings God has given **to** us in order to flow **through** us to others.

The goal of prayer, fasting, almsgiving is to **root us more deeply in love**: to deepen our always-shallow understanding of God's love; to deepen our always-lacking love of neighbor. To remind us that the cross and the heart are kissing cousins, because the cross

is above all a symbol of God's love: God's redeeming love that forgives our sin and births us anew and welcomes us back into the fold and blesses us with new beginnings, every time we turn away from the darkness and toward the Light. The only proper response to being so totally loved is to love in turn, to pass it forward, not because **we're** generous, but because **our God** is.

So the fruit of a Lent well-spent isn't just a more Spirit-ed, spiritual **self**. It is a better **world**. Just as a spoke draws closer to other spokes as it approaches the hub of a wheel, we draw closer to each other as we come into more intimate heart union with God.

This reading from the 1st letter of John isn't one of our assigned Ash Wednesday lessons, but I'd say it fits, especially this year, this Valentine's Day:

God is love... This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about – not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God.

My dear, dear friends, if God loved us, we certainly ought to love each other... First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first.

If anyone boasts, "I love God," and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.

1 John 4:7-11, 19-21 (*The Message*)

If God isn't love, what good is our faith anyway? And if love of God doesn't flow to love of neighbor, how real is it anyway? Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham