

Ash Wednesday is always a little bit of a strange day. We do something that is culturally abhorrent. We look death squarely in the eye and say, "I know, I know. One day I will die." It takes on a particularly strange quality when we mix it with a holiday that has been overmarketed with the expectation that we will participate by buying all kinds of things as a sign of real love. What to make of this strange day, made stranger this year?

Today is not as strange as it may sound. See, Ash Wednesday is the day that we also acknowledge the truth that death does not, and will not ever, have the final word because of the love of God made concrete in the life of Jesus. Through this show of love, which culminates on Easter Day, we know that Love has the final word. Many of us have returned loved ones to the earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. With those burials we sing our alleluias because Love wins. Always. Nothing, not even death, will overwhelm Love that has come down to be with us. And for this truth we can give God thanks and praise, even on solemn days like Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday is, then, a celebration of Love. Not romantic love or the love we have for things ephemeral, but Love that lasts eternally and invites us into life everlasting. But that does not mean that love between two people is unimportant.

C.S. Lewis, the iconic author of the *Chronicles of Narnia* and other Christian-based literature, realized his deep love for American poet and writer Joy Davidman later in life. You may have seen the movie about their deep love called "Shadowlands."

Their love story ended much too soon as Joy was diagnosed with terminal cancer even before they married. Their marriage surprised Lewis by its force and before his relationship with Joy Davidman, Lewis could not have believed in the power of such love. After her death, Lewis wrote an epitaph for his wife that is at once an expression of celebration and sorrow, a blend of Lent and love – perfect for a day that is both Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. Here's Lewis's epitaph for his wife Joy:

Here the whole world (stars, water, air, ----
And field, and forest, as they were
Reflected in a single mind)
Like cast off clothes was left behind
In ashes, yet with hopes that she,
Re-born from holy poverty,
In lenten lands, hereafter may
Resume them on her Easter Day.

We can receive ashes because of the hope we have Easter hope. Ash Wednesday is the acknowledgement of a love story, a story of God who so longed to be with us intimately, that he became one of us. Fully God and fully human, Jesus poured out his life and his

love to point to the love that God has and wants for us.

God still longs for us and for a life of intimacy with us. Lent is a time when we are reminded of that love, and asked to look deeply at the ways in which we block God's presence in our lives, and repent and return to the Lord.

Today we enter Lent, a season in which we are called to set aside time to rediscover God. Because God desires us as a lover desires his or her beloved, we want to remove the obstacles that keep us from God. Obstacles can be as many as there are individual people, and Lent is a time of deep introspection for us individually to discover what we allow to get in the way of God's love and purpose for us.

We have a theme for Lent this year in our parish: How do we give and how do we receive? Our supreme example is Love in the person and presence of Jesus. He gave his life to Love and the world couldn't accept it. It was sacrificial, demanding, expectant, extended to all, turning over tables and everything that gets in the way of true Love. It's no wonder he was executed. The world doesn't know how to hold or accept that gift.

Our baptismal vows call us back to this Love: to live the Christian life as the apostles did; to pray; to resist evil; to repent or to turn around and face God when we have turned away; to proclaim the Good News; to love God, neighbor and self; to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being. Impossible goals, really, but we can begin today to listen to the Spirit who will guide us on the path that we need to follow, and we can put one foot in front of the other and start again. Unlike most of the romantic love that we hear about culturally, Christian love between two people means that we have found someone with whom we can better live out these vows than we can alone. Lewis seems to have found that kind of love in his wife Davidman.

The legend of Saint Valentine says that he was executed for denying Emperor Claudius's command to cease spreading the Christian Gospel. In writing to a young girl who received sight after healing prayers from Saint Valentine, he signed his card "Your Valentine", and the tradition of sending Valentine's cards was born. What has become a Hallmark moment is really based on sacrificial love and commitment, the kind of love that St. Valentine showed towards those he cared for and his commitment to defending the Gospel. And it is shown to us by Jesus and the kind of love he calls us to live.

Love incarnate, the desire to spread this love, and acknowledgement of the ways we turn against this Love is what we acknowledge today. "Repent and return to the Lord" is our call to action today. I hope you find ways to allow Love in your life in new ways this Lent and so become a light to the world. Happy Valentine's Day and a Blessed Lent to you.

Amen.