

Ash Wednesday 2018
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
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Miss Lynch was my second grade teacher. I loved being in her class.

In the days leading up to Valentine's Day, Miss Lynch instructed all of us to make Valentine cards for each other.

The rules were clear – we had to give cards to every student in the class. And, we had to make the Valentines ourselves.

For several days we kept busy, cutting hearts out of red construction paper, using glue and glitter to make them look nice, writing a message on each one:

“Dear Beth, Happy Valentine's Day.”

“Dear Joel, Happy Valentine's Day.”

And then... then it came time for me to make my Valentine card for the little girl I had a crush on. Let's call her “Linda.”

I used *extra* glitter. And with my best handwriting, I wrote my message. It said:

“Dear Linda, I love you very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very much.”

I'm sure I drove Linda crazy with that Valentine! In fact, I drove everybody crazy. No matter where I was, I wanted to talk to people... about Linda.

Sitting at the dinner table at home, I told my family about the funny thing that Linda said that day. My mom smiled. My brother stuck his tongue out at me.

On the playground, I would say to my friends, “Isn't Linda pretty?”

Everywhere I went, I couldn't stop talking about her.

As I grew older, I realized that this happens all the time.

Every time I fell in love with someone, I couldn't stop talking about them! It's what you do when you love someone! You want to tell other people about them!

Today, Ash Wednesday, we celebrate the memory of a saint who fell in love. His name is Saint Valentine.

Valentine lived back in the 3rd century, and was either a priest or bishop from Rome.

At that time, it was illegal for Christians to worship in public. Many got arrested, simply for believing in Jesus.

Valentine would visit Christians who were in prison. Because of that, the Roman authorities suspected that Valentine was a Christian too!

So, he was arrested and sent for trial to a judge named Asterius. And here is where it gets interesting. You see, when he was called before the judge, Valentine should have kept his mouth shut – that is how he could guarantee his safety.

But... Valentine was in love, in love with Jesus Christ, and he could not stop talking about Jesus and his Gospel.

So instead of staying quiet before the judge, Valentine kept talking about this Jesus whom he loved.

And a funny thing happened... the judge was so moved by what Valentine told him, that the judge himself asked to be baptized!

Well, this did not sit well with the Emperor, whose name was Claudius. So Claudius had Valentine brought to him. And at first, the Emperor liked Valentine. Until... until Valentine started talking. And, you guessed it, the only thing that Valentine wanted to talk about was... Jesus. It's what happens when you're in love!

The emperor was not happy that Valentine was trying to teach him the Gospel, so eventually the emperor said to Valentine, "You either stop talking about this Jesus, or I will cut off your head!"

For Valentine, there wasn't really a choice. He was a man in love... in love with Christ... and loving Christ meant more to Valentine than anything else.

So he didn't count the cost of loving Christ... he gave everything he had... because that's what lovers do. Lovers understand: my life only makes sense because of the One I love.

Last weekend, someone said to me, "Oh, it's too bad that Ash Wednesday and St. Valentine's

Day are on the same day.”

But I said, “Actually, it is *perfect*. Because both Ash Wednesday and St. Valentine’s Day are about *our* heart, and *God’s* heart, and what it means to be loved by Jesus.

Did you hear the very first sentence of today’s first reading? God speaks to the people of Israel through the prophet Joel. And what does God say? God says, “Return to me with your whole heart, with fasting... return to your Lord and God. Rend your hearts, not your garments.”

In a way, this first reading is like a Valentine, sent to us by the God who made us.

In this reading, we catch a glimpse of God’s heart. And what do we discover in God’s heart?

We discover that God wants nothing more than communion with you and me.

God’s love is perfect. It asks for nothing, other than for us to accept the gift of his love and to be close enough to receive the gift of his love.

To every one of us, God cries out, “return to me with your whole heart.” In other words – don’t run away, don’t keep your distance, don’t be afraid.

Don’t go looking for love in all the wrong places. Don’t think that you will find happiness anywhere else. Return to me. Let my heart embrace your heart. Let me love you.

That cry from God’s heart actually took flesh when he sent his Son into the world. Jesus is the love of God made visible.

And we NEED for God’s love to be made visible. Why? Because it is the only way you and I can try our imperfect best to love anyone else.

The only reason I could ‘love’ Linda back in second grade was because Jesus had started to teach me what love really is.

The only reason I could love my brother, my mother, my father, was because Jesus had started to teach me what love really is.

The only reason any of us can ever try to love someone else is because Jesus has started to teach us what love is.

But the point is clear – no matter how hard we try, no matter how many red paper hearts we cut

out - our love for one another will always be imperfect. Our love for each other will always be flawed. Our love for each other will always remain somehow incomplete.

And the same is true of our love for God. As long as we live on this earth, we will never love the Lord fully, completely, perfectly.

So that is why we need another Lent. We need the ashes on our forehead to remind us that we're made of dust, and our hearts are sometimes hindered by the grit of daily life.

We need another Lent, with the Gospel call to prayer, fasting, almsgiving. That is, we need the call to *listen* to Christ more directly; to *consume* less so that we can hunger for him; to *give* more, so that others may live.

These ancient disciplines help to redirect our heart, back to where it belongs. Our hearts belong to Christ. We belong to Christ. And *his* heart teaches *my* heart how to love a bit more completely this Lent.

But beware – if you fall more deeply in love with Jesus, you may find that you are talking about him more and more and more.

And don't be surprised if, sometime between now and Easter, you find yourself spontaneously praying, "Jesus, I love you very, very, very, very much."

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