

True Love in Ordinary Time

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

February 14. This year – as many, no doubt, have already noticed -- Valentine's Day lands on Ash Wednesday.

At first glance, this is an odd juxtaposition. The date usually associated with chocolates, flowery festivities and fine meals is, this year, a day of fasting and abstinence and the start of the penitential season that will lead us through the sorrows of Holy Week to the joy of Easter.

So, perhaps, it is worth reflecting on what it means to embrace Ash Wednesday in all its fullness while the world around us is festooned with red and pink, and chocolates surround us as we fast.

The origins of Valentine's Day are woven from the thin and conflicting historical records of a third century Roman martyr, Valentinus. In our own times, his day is dedicated to celebrating love – romantic and otherwise. The primary focus has been to mark the occasion with expressions of both sentimental passion and light-hearted affection. From the childish exchanges of candy hearts (a perennial dentist's delight!) to the more adult gifts of diamond rings and long-stemmed red roses, this is the day on which we express to our nearest and dearest the depth of our love.

Alas, even at its absolute best, our human love is imperfect. We strive for that selfless, sacrificial love that wants only the good of the beloved. Yet, so often our good intentions fall short.

It is, perhaps for this reason, that Ash Wednesday on February 14 is a true gift rather than an awkward accident of the calendar. Ash Wednesday turns our attention toward perfect love. It is the start of the season that will move us each day toward Good Friday and to a glimpse of what perfect love truly means. It is the day that invites us to appreciate the way that God took on our humanity, and all the suffering that entailed, out of love. In the readings at the Mass for Ash Wednesday this year are three lessons that will prepare us not only to begin Lent but, in the spirit of Valentine's Day, should also inspire us to love more perfectly.

In the first reading for Ash Wednesday, the prophet Joel describes the perfect love of God. He proclaims, “[G]racious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness.” [Jl. 2:13]. This is an Ash Wednesday invitation to consider how well the human love we give compares to this divine love we are given in such abundance.

Then, in the Psalm for Ash Wednesday, we beg God, “[a] clean heart create for me, O God.” [Ps. 51: 12.] This prayer, too, is a perfect Valentine’s Day intention. In it, we ask for new hearts that are able to love those entrusted to us more wisely and well.

Third, the Gospel reading includes the famous admonition of Christ to do our virtuous deeds in private rather than in public. He warns, “*Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them.*” [Mt. 6: 1]. This, too, may be particularly apt this year. On a day when splashy, flashy Valentine’s Day displays of affection are inconsistent with Ash Wednesday observances, it is a particularly good time to consider the quiet, unnoticed and, yes, truly ordinary ways that we can show our love for each other. This love is not the one that comes on the day when we are told we must declare our love publicly and boldly. Rather, it is expressed in all the steadfast little ways in which true love is lived quietly every day of our lives.

So, on February 14, when we lay aside our Valentine’s Day plans to begin our Lenten season, we are not losing a chance to celebrate love. Instead, we are gaining a chance to think about what love truly means, to be grateful for the way Christ sacrificed for us out of love, and to ask God’s help to love better in all the days of our ordinary times.

And... if we need another chance, Ash Wednesday will arrive on Valentine’ Day again in 2029!

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