

Ash Wednesday 2024

Feb. 14, 2024

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

People always look at me weird when I say that I love Valentine's Day.

They think that because I am single, I should hate it, but I don't.

I love everything about it – the cards, the flowers, the décor, the colors - red, pink, and white. I love the hearts. I love all of the things about Valentine's Day, except for the fact that most people don't know the real story behind it.

So, even though a lot of people hate when Ash Wednesday falls on St. Valentine's Day, I love it. I love it, because it gives me the opportunity to talk about the historical St. Valentine, not the day that has been hijacked by Cupid. And I say Cupid, not Hallmark, because Hallmark actually has a card that talks about St. Valentine, and I worked for Hallmark for over 10 years.

St. Valentine was the bishop of Umbria, that's Italy, and was martyred during the reign of Emperor Diocletian in the 3rd Century when Diocletian was busy killing off all the Christians who wouldn't worship him as one of the lesser gods.

Because Valentine refused to worship the emperor, the emperor had him arrested and put in prison. The emperor always gave people time to change their minds, but Valentine would not, so while he was hanging out in prison awaiting his execution, he started to tell everyone about God's love for them.

A lot of people would have thought, I am in prison, how could God love me. But, that did not deter Valentine. Even though he was sentenced to death, he kept preaching of the unity and constancy of God's love.

We don't know how many people total heard him and came to faith, but we do know of one person who did – the daughter of the prison guard. She would visit the prison and sit by Valentine's cell every day to hear him tell her how much God loves her, and she became a Christian right there in the prison.

Imagine that – being set free in a prison.

When the day came for Valentine's execution, he wrote her a letter telling her not to fret. He was not afraid and would see her in Heaven. He signed it – your Valentine.

The first Valentine was a letter of love - God's love and the love of a friend/mentor.

Contrary to the stories you might have heard, it wasn't that Valentine fell in love with her romantically, because he was pretty old and she was quite young, but that he loved her as a Father and she loved him as a daughter, which is what happens in the Church – a new family is formed.

In baptism, we become a family as we share in God's parental love for all of us.

So, I'm glad that Ash Wednesday is also St. Valentine's Day, because St. Valentine reminds us that we are called to share God's love everywhere we find ourselves, even in prison and even when facing death.

Although, we might not often find ourselves in prison, we are always facing death. We are terminal after all, which is one thing we remember on Ash Wednesday. We are dust and to dust we shall return. We are the created, not the Creator.

You are dust and to dust you shall return.

So, how do we live as animated dust? As the created, not the Creator?

As the created, we are not to be worshipped or praised, but to worship and praise God.

So, when we give to the poor, we shouldn't make a fuss that will make other people worship us in our generosity.

When we pray, we shouldn't put on a prayer show in order for others to worship us in our eloquence.

When we fast, we shouldn't bring attention to ourselves in order for others to worship us in our piety.

When we receive treasure from God, we shouldn't store it up for others to see, but never receive, so that others will worship us in our wealth.

Because we are just dust, all glory belongs to God the Creator, not to us the created.

That is what Emperor Diocletian did not understand and why so many Christians refused to worship him and were killed instead.

Diocletian thought the world revolved around him.

Christians understand that God puts all things into motion and creates everything, therefore it is God alone who is to be worshiped and glorified – not the emperor, not ourselves, not any part of creation. Only the Creator is to be worshipped.

So, we put ash on the spot where we were marked with the cross of Christ forever on our foreheads in Baptism and remember that we are the created who need a Savior because we are not God and we cannot save ourselves.

But, God has come to us in great love to bring us salvation. It is the biggest “Valentine” we could ever receive, which also makes it the greatest Valentine we can give.

So, whatever we do for Lent, it is to put the focus on God’s love for all that God has created. God loves dirt!

If we give to the poor, it is because God is generous. If we pray, it is because God is listening. If we fast, it is because God fasted from being God to become human for us. If we share our gifts, it is because God is infinite and we are finite. The creation doesn’t last forever, but the Creator does.

What we do testifies to how great God is, not how great we are, because we’re just dust, the created, and we have a finite amount of time and resources to share with others, but when we share our time, talents, and resources with those who need them, they become part of God’s giving which is infinite and eternal.

The good news is that even though we are finite dust, we get to participate in the Kingdom of God which is infinite.

And that is why St. Valentine wasn’t afraid to be killed by the emperor. Although he was a finite creature, he knew that he was part of God who is infinite, which is the gift of Baptism.

We do not live on in what others think of us. We live on in God who is continually creating today – in, with, and through dust, the dust that includes us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.