

St. Valentine and Ashes February 14, 2024

Happy Ash Wednesday. Happy Valentine's Day.

The coincidence of these two events sharing the same date has led to quite a few jokes and comics. Jay Sidebotham is an Episcopal priest who also draws cartoons for church calendars. He drew one that shows a priest giving out ashes, saying, "Remember that you are dust, but very lovable dust."

Another comic he drew shows a couple sitting at a table in a fancy restaurant. The waiter comes up and says, "For your Valentine's Day dinner, you will be served water, hard crusty bread, and tasteless wine. Enjoy... and repent."

There are a handful of Ash Wednesday Valentine's, one of which reads, "I can't give up sweets for Lent because I'd have to give up you."

Another says, "I simply must ash you to be my Valentine."

Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. Believe it or not, the two fell on the same day in 2018, and they will share a date again just 5 years from now, in 2029.

It's an odd juxtaposition, to celebrate a mushy holiday that's all about love and emotion and expressing our feelings... combined with a day of somberness, reflection, and acknowledging our mortality.

Maybe the story of St. Valentine can offer us some insight. Valentine was a priest in the early Christian Church, living in the late 3rd century. At that time, the Roman emperor Claudius II was in power, who was known for persecuting Christians.

According to legend, Valentine became known for officiating marriages between Christians (against the orders of the emperor). Thus love became associated with the story of Valentine.

Valentine was discovered, arrested, and sentenced to death. While he was in jail, awaiting execution, Valentine befriended the daughter of his jailer. The young woman was blind, but Valentine miraculously healed her of her blindness. Before he was killed, Valentine wrote one last letter to her and signed it, "from your Valentine."

"Saint Valentine." Britannica. February 13, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Valentine>.

Now that is all very much the substance of legend rather than history – we have no way to verify any of those claims. But the story of St. Valentine does shed some light on this strange combination of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day.

While he was imprisoned, Valentine had the opportunity to look death in the eye and consider his own mortality. In his final days, the man did not become bitter or spiteful towards the Roman emperor or his captors. Instead, he formed a connection with a family member of the

man who was imprisoning him. He chose love and affection over despair or anger. Seeing his end helped distill his dedication to spreading love.

That is a good example for us. As we are reminded this day that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we have to think about what is important. Our days are numbered. Do we spend our time being resentful or grumpy? Do we spend our days on autopilot, going through the same motions as the day before? Do we try to accumulate as much wealth and as many possessions as possible in our limited life span?

Or do we say, “I can only do so much; what I **choose** to do is spread love”? Can we, like Valentine, tune out all the competing messages of our world to hear the call to love?

It really is a deeply meaningful connection, to put Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day together. The reminder of our mortality inspires us, calls us to live as though every day were Valentine’s Day, to use our time to love others.

I’d like to share with you a reflection written by Maren Tirabassi, who is a friend of a friend. Maren took the section of Scripture about love from 1 Corinthians (“Love is patient; love is kind”) and rewrote it. And I’d like to share it with you.

Improv on 1 Corinthians 13 for Ash Wednesday on Valentine’s Day

Maren C. Tirabassi

If I speak in tongues of justice or spirituality,
but do not have ashes,
I am a self-congratulating vigil,
a Sunday service inspired by itself.
If I have social media outreach,
a labyrinth in the church garden,
Bible study in the pub, [...]
but do not have ashes, I am nothing.
[...]

Ashes are awkward; ashes are dirty;
ashes, like love,
are not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude.
Ashes do not insist on a perfect Lent;
they do not even need to be in church
or a gimmick to get folks to church;
they do not inventory wrongdoing,
especially the wrongdoing of others,
but rejoice in the precious now,
the very fragility of life.

Ashes bear love, believe in love,
hope in the possibility
of forgiveness for everyone,

endure even times of lovelessness.

Forgiveness never ends.

As for spiritual practices,

they will come to an end;

as for both the precious hymn

and the passionate praise song,

they will grow quiet;

as for theology and faith formation,

they will change again.

[...]

but, when the full forgiveness comes —

it will look more like Valentine's Day.

Maren C. Tirabassi. "Improv on 1 Corinthians 13 for Ash Wednesday on Valentine's Day." Gifts in Open Hands (blog). February 5, 2018.

Amen.

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