

Matthew 6:21

When Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine's Day, it must seem like a cruel twist of fate for all those who are giving up chocolate for Lent. Do you realize that it has been 73 years since these two dates coincided on the calendar? There seems to be nothing whatsoever that Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day have in common. Valentine's Day is about love, especially romantic love. It's about giving valentines--hearts, chocolates, flowers, and candy to one's sweetheart. Hallmark loves Valentine's Day. Cards galore are purchased.

But who gives Ash Wednesday cards? It's like the complete opposite of Valentine's Day. Dark, depressing, the giving up of sweets instead of the devouring of them. And no restaurant would ever feature a couple's Ash Wednesday meal off in some cozy corner. And what community would sponsor an Ash Wednesday dance? Polar opposites in every way. Or so it seems.

The Gospel text appointed for Ash Wednesday includes these words of Jesus: "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*" It's easy to see where our heart is on Valentine's Day. We don't hand out flowers and chocolates to just anyone. School teachers may make us put valentines into the boxes of all our classmates, even the ones we don't like (I know mine did), but when we get older we give valentines only to those whom we treasure in our heart.

And this is precisely what Ash Wednesday is all about. On Ash Wednesday God hands to us the most beautiful valentine of them all. He opens up His heart and He shows us that you and I are what He treasures most. This is the meaning of Lent. God sent His Son to the cross of Calvary, willing to give Him up in that awful way, because you are His dearest treasure.

This is staggering if we really think about it. Because there is no reason at all why God should treasure us. We have not treasured Him. Not above everything else in life. Spending time with Him is never a high priority for us. We do not give our best to Him. We give Him leftovers; what we can spare.

No shy young man is going to open up his heart to the girl who has rejected him; who has treated him poorly. But this is what God does to you and me. He exposes Himself to ridicule...from us. He becomes vulnerable to our rejection. His love for us is so amazing that He is willing to suffer all, even from us, in order to have us for Himself.

This is no ordinary kind of love. It is the essence of love. It sacrifices all for the sake of its object. On Valentine's Day we may sacrifice a few dollars for the one we love. But what price can be placed on God's love? It cost Him everything to redeem us from the power of hell. He had to enter into that awful place for us to save us from it. And He didn't hesitate. He walked to the cross with love in His heart for you. He went there willingly, determined, for it was the only way to deliver you from sin, death, and hell.

St. Valentine, a Christian priest living in Rome during the Third Century, was martyred for his faith. It is said that on the day of his execution he left a note of encouragement for a child of his jailer, and that this note was written on a piece of paper in the shape of a heart.

It seems as if Valentine's Day has more in common with Ash Wednesday and Lent than people realize. God's word to you is written all over His heart. "I love you dearly," He says to you in the Gospel, in your Baptism. "I treasure you, even though you have not treasured Me above all things. I forgive you of this and of all your sins."

And then He also does this - He reserves a table for you here at His Valentine's Day meal. This is a feast of love. Here He gives Himself to you. Would He give Himself so fully and completely to someone He does not treasure? Then see this Sacrament as assurance of His love for you. See it for what it is - a meal of grace; one that unites Him to you and you to Him. No restaurant out there can offer such a meal to couples in love.

Tonight we begin the holy season of Lent here at God's Table. We come humbly, penitently. And we come boldly, believing that we, you and I, truly are God's dearest treasure. Amen.