

Ash Wednesday-2018

Joel 2: 12-19

Matt. 6: 16-21

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Here is your trivia question for the consideration; The first greeting that will have happened this morning is?--Happy Valentine's Day, of course. No one is ever likely to say—"Happy Ash Wednesday"! It is ironic that these 2 holidays fall on the same date in 2018. The obvious symbol for Valentine's is a big red heart! Notice the last phrase in the Gospel text—"For where your TREASURE is, there is where your HEART will be. (reside, be kept, your very being and existence)

The tendency is to view Ash Wednesday as the most somber 24 hours in the Christian Year, and there is seriousness and intensesness to the mood due to what is at stake. But there is even more behind that. **This time together, and when we are alone, is an invitation to give our hearts away to One who has already given His heart fully to us.** So it is a time of taking cardiac inventory and spiritual pulse rate!

The beginning point of Ash Wednesday, and indeed all of Lent, is not so much guilt, as it is self-assessment in light of the face of Grace. (Look at the first line in Psalm 51—Have mercy on me according to your lovingkindness) It is true that we have received ashes and a stark reminder of our mortality and personal limitations, BUT those ashes are placed on you and me in light of EASTER. The ending is the Start! We can only take this journey and have the courage and honesty to come face to face with our finitude and look into our hearts IF we know we are already loved and accepted beyond the depth of our limits.

Today we are asked to take away the masks and the neurotic behaviors that keep us from being who we really are. There was a wonderful cartoon in the paper earlier this week. It is called That A Baby...and of course the chief character is this round little cherub who has all the best lines. Baby is reflecting on what a marvelous thing chalk is. In one frame he views people writing on boards, in another it is athletes dusting their hands before rock climbing or lining ball field boundaries, in another he sees children with large colored sticks painting sidewalks with it. In the final panel he discovers it is the primary ingredient in the little Valentine Candy Hearts, and he cries out, "I Knew It!"--A Chalk Heart; dry, dusty, held together by inert material and not really alive, but pretending to be. It is an apt metaphor for the message of today's Gospel, for hypocrisy is really about pretending and appearances rather than authentic living.

Remember you are Dust! That is, be real. Is your heart captivated by things that have no lasting value or meaning? (Story of me getting on the elevator and someone thinking they recognized me—flattering and inflating UNTIL—I realized that he thought I was someone else!) Have you ever had that nagging sense that you are simply missing something in terms of who you are; that you don't measure up? Have you ever spent energy drawing mental charts to see how you compare to other people? Have you ever stood in a group and spoken or acted in a way contrary to your own values just to gain someone's approval? How much is your worth or value tied to what others say or think about you? Have you ever put on a good front, pretending to be someone you weren't, just so you would fit in and be accepted? If you recognize any of those examples or any number of similar ones in yourself, then you have a sense of the human condition, and how much our false selves dictate how we live. Today we are all asked to see if that is really adequate. Are our hearts captivated by the finite or by someone who surpasses all human limitations? St. Augustine, in his spiritual autobiography, The Confessions, with a little regret, put it this way, "Too late have I loved

you, Beauty so ancient and so new; too late have I loved you! Behold, you were within me, While I was on the outside: It was there that I sought you and upon the shapely thing you have made. I rushed headlong, misshapen. You were with me, But I was not with you.” But his very realization of the all-encompassing beauty and love of God did make his heart ALIVE. He discovered what God wanted for him all along; to be loved and to love as a child of his father.

The journey we begin today is not going from being bad to being good morally. It is not self-denigration or devaluation of who we are so that we may become saints in some rarified existence. It is not even about giving up something for Lent, unless that giving opens our hearts up to a richer sense of God's self-giving. I think Lent asks us to give away our attachments; to give up the lost searches and trivial pursuits that never quite get us where we most desire to be as people. Lent can only make sense if it is a journey toward something and not simply away from. Lenten disciplines are not a way to gain the approval of others, ourselves, and certainly not God. They are about assisting us to give away our hearts in love to God and to one another, because in Christ God has already done that for us. What is our treasure? It is where this journey leads us—toward the great celebration of life we call Easter!! Amen+