

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2018

St. Augustine Cathedral

12:10 pm.

Today is a real “red letter” day---literally! It’s a liturgical “2-fer” as we celebrate two important days: St. Valentine’s Feast Day, which has morphed into a day for our culture to celebrate those special people in our lives whom we love--our “Valentines”. It’s a day normally for the romantic “red” color to decorate our cards and gifts to our Valentines. But this year our celebrations will have to be candy and chocolate-less.....

Since today is also, and even more importantly, Ash Wednesday----one of only two days in the whole year that is a universal day of fast (only 3 meals and no eating between meals) and abstinence from meat. I have to admit that I’ve heard a lot more people wishing each other Happy Valentine’s Day than Happy Ash Wednesday. But I wish you happiness today on both accounts.

I’ve been told that the last time that Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday “collided” was more than 70 years ago in 1945, so aren’t we fortunate?! But, while it might seem like these two observances have nothing in common, I think if we look closer, they are very much related. Both these special days have in common the human heart. The human heart has always been the symbol of human love, and so on Valentine’s Day, we see red candy hearts, chocolate hearts, and heart-shaped pendants and bracelets everywhere. And by the same token, it’s the human heart that the Church “targets” for what Ash Wednesday and really the entire 40-days of Lent, challenges all of us: to change our hearts. In fact, we heard that a lot in the Scripture Readings we’ve just listened to. The Prophet Joel in today’s First Reading told us that the Lord says to us: “*Return to Me with your whole heart...*”. Today’s Psalm prayed to God: “*Create for me O Lord a clean heart...*”. And the verse before the Gospel urged us all: “*If today you hear God’s Voice, harden not your hearts.*”

And of course, in today’s Gospel, Jesus was teaching us how to change our “hearts” and “return to the Lord with our whole hearts” through the three traditional Lenten practices: to give alms----to let our hearts be moved by compassionate concern for the needs of others; to pray---to unite our hearts with

the Heart of Christ through intentional periods of being prayerfully united with our Loving God; and **to fast**---to unite ourselves in solidarity with those who truly lack basic needs of food, water, human love and basic human respect, and at the same time to willingly restrain our appetites for comfort and to have more than we can possibly need.

In Pope Francis' Lenten Message to all Catholics throughout the world, he chose the theme: "Because of the increase of iniquity, the love of many will grow cold."

As we look around the world, we see the signs of "iniquity"---sin, division, violence, disrespect in basic human communication on social media and in personal interactions----and we could very well say that is the result of basic human love grown cold. Lent is the Season that calls us to turn away from "iniquity" of any sort----extreme and violent iniquity (that we would put in the category of mortal sins), or even the less, more mundane, lack of patience, irritability, short-tempered-ness that we on occasion have with those in our daily lives, even with our "special Valentines" (what we might put in the category of venial sins). Whether it's extreme or mundane, Lent is the time to turn away from sin, and re-ignite our love grown cold into a flame of compassion and care.

We have come to our Cathedral today in such large numbers----and people have gone to churches everywhere around the world this day in the same large numbers----primarily to have ashes put on our forehead. To come forward to receive ashes is a sign of humility! It's a willingness to hear the priest or minister say to you: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return" OR "Repent, and believe in the Gospel".

But look at these ashes. First of all, they used to be something else. In this case, I think they used to be palm branches, which at some point were lush and green growing on a palm tree. But after being burned, they're just ashes.

The image of "fire" in one way represents destruction; but in other ways, it sometimes symbolizes "passion"----courage----the Fire of the Holy Spirit represents being consumed with the Love that we have in our Hearts for Jesus!

When we have ashes placed on us today, let it be a reminder of what Pope Francis calls a "love grown cold", but which we intend, through prayer, fasting and almsgiving/works of charity, to reignite into a Flame of Love for God and His holy People----all of us---the Body of Christ.

As Pope Francis writes: "If, at times, the flame of charity seems to die in our own hearts, know that this is never the case in the Heart of God. He constantly gives us a chance to begin loving anew. "

May that be our basic Lenten resolution: to begin loving God anew; to love our neighbor anew; to love our special Valentines' anew. And know for certain, as Jesus kept reminding us today, that "our Father Who sees in secret---Who sees all that we do---will reward you.

God bless you, now and always!