**February 14, 2018
A Sermon for Ash Wednesday**

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**GOSPEL Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the sixth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 1“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.
  2“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
  5“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
  16“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.
  19“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

The church’s time and the church’s proclamation are almost always at odds with prevailing forces in the world, and sometimes the dissonance is more noticeable than others. Ash Wednesday is almost always a time like that, maybe even a little bit more so this year.

Today, we are gathered by God to remember we are finite, mortal, limited, flawed, desperately in need of God, and desperately loved by God. Today we walk right up to a fundamental truth that so much of this world’s time and energy go into denying: death is real. It will come to each of us. Today we take the first steps following Christ through the way of Lent,which is the way of the Cross, and to his death, and to our own. And, I’m not sure Hallmark knows how to make a card for that.

The truths told here and the practices we embrace as part of this season won’t be seen in many other places, at least not in mainstream US culture,Today, in particular, of course, many others are celebrating decadence and romance, which, let’s be honest, is actually a weird way to observe the martyrdom of Saint Valentine, but that’s just a bonus layer of irony in the St. Ash Valentine’s WednesDay trifle.

It is also an odd thing to have the church’s season of fasting begin on the day when, for whatever reason, we’re supposed to be buying chocolate covered strawberries, indulgent meals, champagne, jewelry and lingerie.

Maybe it’s even more odd for those who don’t feel connected to this secular holiday because they happen to be among of the huge percentage of us that don’t have the kind of romantic relationship that Valentine’s Day seems to say we should. Alternative ways of celebrating this holiday when you feel left out of it have been on the rise in recent years. But, I’m not sure it helps that the church offers this particular alternative activity this year when, if we are already feeling alone, we are invited to come have ashes smeared on our face and be reminded that we’re all going to die.

In fact, these two days together could very well be the hardest possible confluence of events for some of us, since mortality is the thing that has separated some of us from those we love. Valentine’s Day is reminder enough…and now the church has to remind us, too? Not only of the ways we feel alone or at odds with the pink hearts and jewelry ads, but of our much deeper pain? This day could knock us down even harder. It could tear through almost every comfort.

And Lent does do that in many ways. It calls us to walk in our vulnerability…to set a place at our dinner table for our shame, to chat with our weaknesses and call them by name. But not for nothing. To acknowledge the truth of their existence is the way to also feel more deeply the truth of a God who also walks with us, sits down at our tables, and invites us to chat. Because God does that…and God does it knowing full well about all those other parts of us, too.

In Lent, we look into the stark mirror of the world’s brokenness, our sinfulness and suffering, and the abyss of death. And the worst of everything in us and around us reaches out and touches us, and whether we are unflinching in the face of it or not it is through this path that we come to know the depth of God’s love…and feel God’s touch reaching into the worst of everything to draw us through to life.

Today, in Preschool Chapel we read the story of the raising of Jairus’ daughter. Jairus is a powerful man, but not powerful enough that death didn’t come to slouch in the corners of his house, and then lumber up to his daughter’s bedside. Jairus sought out Jesus in his fear and pain, and Jesus followed him back to his home…on the way being grabbed in a crowd by a woman who’d been bleeding for twelve years…the entire twelve years this sick little girl has been alive. The woman is healed, but the daughter dies before they can reach her, but Jesus “reaches down into death,” as our children’s Bible said, and pulls her back into life, and then just turns around and tells everybody to stop staring and get the little girl some breakfast.

The story schedule for preschool chapel had been planned long before we knew we would hear the story today, on Ash Wednesday, which would also be Valentine’s Day. And, it turns out it was the perfect story. It is a story of death. And it is a story of love. And, you see, the two are not so separable as we might want them to be. So, for some, candy hearts and chocolates might be a way to express love today. And we will also observe another symbol and sign of the message we most need to hear.

The poet of Song of Solomon writes: “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave." It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. A smeared grey cross, a seal of love as strong as death, love that carries us through and beyond death love that joins us to the ones we love even through the separation death brings, love that is more jealous than the abyss and won’t let it claim us from the One who loves us, love that burns like fire, burning the signs of human praise into the ash that marks us with the truest shape love takes that we have ever known, the cross of the One who saves us.

The cross and death are powers that stand before us, that threaten to devour us. And in this season, we walk right into their mouths and we don’t do it alone. We hear it said, “Remember that you are dust…and to dust you shall return, and we do remember, and we know that this is true, and we also know that if all things, from earth dust to stardust, belong to God, then so do we.

This Lent, may you know the love that is strong as death, that won’t let the grave hold you, that will burn with mighty fire everything that keeps you from its embrace.

Let it be so. Amen.