

Ash Wednesday 2024 Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

How did you mark today's date on your calendar? With a red heart for Valentine's Day or a black cross for Ash Wednesday? We might think of them as polar opposites, but I have enjoyed the challenge of placing these holidays in creative conversation with one another. Not to sound like the Grinch who stole Valentine's Day, but we'd have to say that what was once a religious observance has become secularized and commercialized. Little Debbie replaced her Christmas Tree cakes with Valentine's Heart cakes a good week before we even sang *Silent Night*. So culturally, couples face social pressure to make grand gestures to one another on Valentine's Day. And although Ash Wednesday is probably *the* day in the Christian liturgical calendar that is *least* likely to be exploited by Hallmark, it is also the one day that we traditionally use an obvious gesture, an outward symbol—the cross of ashes.

It's also the one day that our lectionary includes Jesus' admonition *against* outward gestures showing how religious we are: *Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them... Whenever you give alms, don't sound a trumpet before you... whenever you pray, do not stand at the street corners so you may be seen... whenever you fast, do not disfigure your face so as to show others... whoops.* But Jesus doesn't say *don't give alms, don't pray, or don't fast...* What he says is *don't make a ruckus of doing those things for the express benefit of your own reputation.* There's nothing wrong with praying, giving to charity, or fasting; at least, we'd better hope there's nothing wrong with these practices, as the church has encouraged these Lenten disciplines for centuries. And if we switch holidays again, there's nothing wrong with flowers, chocolate hearts, and fancy dinners on Valentine's Day.

Unless...Are we giving these gifts so the other person feels loved, valued, and appreciated? Or is the motivation to make ourselves look good—like a good spouse or partner? Are we trying to love just in one day the way we should be loving all year? To bring us back to church: do we pray, act charitably, and fast during Lent because we're trying to look like pious people? Do we receive ashes to advertise to others that we've been to extra church in the middle of the week, or even for ourselves, to feel like we've earned extra God points when we see our smudged forehead in the mirror? Or do we pray and fast because we recognize that our faith has room to grow? Are we charitable not to *appear* generous but because others need our generosity? Do we look at today and this season of Lent as an opportunity to *look* good or to *be good*—to congratulate ourselves on six weeks of discipline or to practice living more fully into God's kingdom so that becomes more of who we are?

At the heart of the gospel, Jesus, who selflessly loved and served others, taught in word and deed that God's commandments are fulfilled when we love God and love our neighbors. Lent is the season of penitence, when we acknowledge the ways in which we *don't* love God and others as we should and then make a concerted effort to do better. Today we mark our foreheads with an ashen cross and remember we are dust, but we do that as prayer that God will create in us clean hearts—hearts that are turned toward others. May what we see out here not distract us from what's going on in here. Or in other words, let us mark today with a black cross and a red heart as we begin this season of learning to love a little more.