Ash Wednesday February 14, 2018

All Saints’ Church Year B

Isaiah 58:1-12 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Psalm 51, 103:8-14 Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Create is us, dear Lord, clean hearts. Amen.

Happy Valentine’s Day. Happy Ash Wednesday… ok… that doesn’t sound right. I don’t think we ever say, “Happy Ash Wednesday….. maybe we say, “I hope you have a Good Ash Wednesday,” but not “Happy.”

Quite a contrast between these two days, especially in the juxtaposition of chocolates and roses and celebrations of feasting and extravagance against our stark altar and prayers for repentance and rituals of reflection and renewal, even for some of us, practices of restrictions and fasting.

Hmm.

What’s even stranger this year, is that Easter will be celebrated on April Fool’s Day… our 2018 calendar seems to be having its way with us, almost as if we are victims of some cosmic societal joke, out to make fun of us.

And yet, as strange as it may seem, Ash Wednesday is like Valentine’s Day because a love letter is being sent our way today. And Easter is like April Fool’s Day because the foolish way of letting go and believing in God’s power and not human power wins the day. Death never has the last word, because God’s Yes for us trumps our foolish No.

Let’s begin with gift of our Love letter on Ash Wednesday:

The sages remind us that we wear two pockets though out life. Our love letter comes to us through these two pockets.

In one pocket is a letter folded, and each day you should take it out, unfold it and read it as a special message from God: “Remember that you…….. You…. You are My beloved child, in whom I am well-pleased. You are so special, so beautiful, so welcomed; you are the gift of My rejoicing.”

God created the world with you, actually, only you in mind. God created the world and its entire splendor for you. There’s no greater gift than God’s unending abiding love for you, just as you are. Take this letter out daily.

In the other pocket is dust and ashes. You should put your hand into this pocket on a daily basis to “Remember that you….. are dust, and to dust you shall return.” And in this dust holds all the brokenness, death blows, and sins of our world, the reality of our human condition. (yet another school shooting)

Without some kind of grounding, we can become empty, full of sound and fury signifying nothing. In the grand scheme of things within this overarching grand universe, our lives can, dare I say, are insignificant.

Yet these two pockets carry our love letter: We hold the reality of God’s crazy wild and passionate love for us simultaneously within the hands of humility.

It is here, within this impossible paradox of truth that you are everything and nothing, we can let go and let God. That’s how Jesus lived. I sometimes love imagining hanging out with Jesus at the campfire, full of joy, laughter, charisma, and power… He just gave life his all, holding on greatly to the power of love and moments of connections and insights. Yet he also let it all go, willing to die for his friends, for us.

Jesus, the king of dispassion, put his life into God’s hands

And that’s what we are being asked to do. Just as we hold out our hands to receive communion, open and free, we hold out our hands and ask God to do with our lives as God wills. Simply put, to follow Jesus. To follow him into the wilderness and to pray for Jesus’ spirit of compassion and love to descend upon us, all of life…. the good and the bad, the spectacular, the broken, and when we are feeling like the last, the lost and the lonely. May your will be done, dear Lord.

And yet, we fail all the time to walk into the wilderness with Jesus. We are weak, slow to remember that the “fast” of our lives is to put ourselves into God’s hands, just as Jesus did. But that’s ok. Because, every time we fail, we have yet again, another opportunity to return and to remember to pray to love these right things. Of course, as Jesus reminds us, you are loved no matter what. Do not judge. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world.”

Thank goodness, we walk this walk together. We all fall down, indeed, and as Paul reminds us in his own love letter, “We are impostors, and yet we are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

Ash Wednesday is our love letter from God and our response is to ***be*** with open hands, to live this stance as best we can.

Lent is a time of practice, discipline, intention, process, community. I invite you to participate with us:

Morning Prayer, Monday through Friday, 7:30 am, in the Lady’s Chapel, Mary’s Chapel…through Maundy Thursday. If you have never done morning prayer, give it a try. You need to know nothing, just ride on the prayers of your fellow travelers.

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of John, Tuesday night’s 6:30-7:30 pm, in the Parlor as we gather to share with each other our understanding and delight in God’s love for us

Becoming Beloved Community: the Episcopal Church of New Hampshire is partnering with the Black Heritage Trail of New Hampshire to learn stories about resiliency, courage, and faith within the untold stories about slavery in New Hampshire. (Card in the back of the church with the website link)

Today we learned about Will Clarkson, sold by slave traders when he was sixteen, and lived as a slave in Portsmouth, yet fought for the freedom of this country during the Revolutionary War. Imagine his resiliency and the power of his knowledge of what was right.

We are writing collects for each individual featured in this Lenten series. I’ve been assigned a few. If you would like to help me write a collect, let me know.

Ash Wednesday reminds us of both God’s desire for us and our desire ***to desire*** God back….. to walk with Jesus, to lift up our hands, open. It’s that simple and that difficult.

We are walking together… thank God, in reading our love letter, as we remind each other to trust that God will carry us where we need to go. AMEN