

**ASH WEDNESDAY YEAR B**  
**Gospel: Mt 6:1-6, 16-20**

**February 14, 2018**  
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The first image that I saw on Facebook this morning was of a relic of St. Valentine, after whom Valentine's Day is named. It is an unusual calendar occurrence for Ash Wednesday to fall on Valentine's Day but this year we get today and another strange coincidence that Easter Sunday falls on April 1st: April Fool's Day. I don't know what to make of that latter combination, but the St. Valentine's relic, which was the scary looking skull of the martyr St. Valentine from the third century, made me think that this Valentine's Day - Ash Wednesday combo really does work! And it has nothing to do with navigating a plan to give up chocolate for Lent when Lent starts on Valentine's day!

Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent are meant to remind us of the finitude of our time in this life. The invocation for the distribution of ashes: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" is meant to make us gulp hard for air, and confront our very real mortality. It is meant to be sobering- rightly so. And it is meant to invite us to a time of deeper reflection about our lives and our relationships with God and with others.

If we take that focus on relationships with God and with others to heart this Lent, it becomes clear that giving up chocolate or meat or the like for Lent, whilst valuable for our physical health, may not have much impact in the relationship sphere. In fact, if we spend Lent telling others that we cannot have this or that or the next thing because we have given them up for Lent, it might even veer dangerously close the "practicing your piety before others" that Jesus inveighs against in today's Gospel. Our friends might be impressed by our piety, but as Jesus indicates, that is far from the point.

I am not going to take the option of telling us not to give anything up for Lent, however. But the renunciations will look much different if we select them with an eye on deepening our relationships with God and others. If this Lent will be a time to deepen relationships with others, the questions becomes whether there are things that I need to give up to allow time and space for those relationships. My dear spouse and I have found ourselves sitting beside each other in the living room for ore time than I care to confess to publicly, each playing a game on our smartphones. No talking or interacting at all.

And I don't think we are the only couple or family who have had the experience of being mesmerized by our smartphones rather than having a conversation. So I am giving up my Bubblewitch Saga habit for Lent, and I am rather hoping that Celena is giving up CandyCrush. As we receive ashes today and are reminded how short our lifetimes are, it refocuses our attention and supports us in making our relationships with our loved ones a higher priority in there here and now of our lives. Setting some "time without technology" each day or several times of week would free up time for our dear ones, and be a kind of Lenten "giving up" that I can heartily support.

Another aspect of attending to relationships for Lent is, for me, much more challenging. Jesus' instructions to his followers were to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." Thomas Merton summed it up for Christians saying that "Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy." This is the sacrificial agape kind of love that Jesus demonstrated in his life and ministry. It is (or should be) the hallmark of the Christian way. And in recent months, I have

longed for more agape, and less scapegoating of people of color and immigrants, vilifying of political opponents, encouragement of bigotry, lies and greed, and reveling in sheer nastiness under the guise of telling it like it is. So, although I cannot change the behaviors and thoughts of others except by changing how I live and treat others, I am praying for God's grace to use this Lent to tamp down my inner voice criticizing and judging others. And I am going to strive mightily, also and only with the help of God's grace, to pray for those "enemies: who oppress me and other human beings.

Lastly, Lent gifts us with time to renew our relationship with God. Wherever that relationship may be today, the next seven weeks encourage exploration of our faith and a deeper listening to God. In the early church Lent was the period during which those who were becoming Christians prepared for their baptisms, which would take place on the night before Easter Sunday, during the Easter vigil. There may be folks among our number who have not yet been baptized and who wish to be. If so, let me know- we can help you with that. But those of us who are baptized are also called to prepare ourselves to renew our baptismal vows at Easter. How we do that will be as different as each member of this faith community. Some options from which one might choose include: participate in one of the upcoming small group, spend some extra time reading Scripture, read a spiritual book or keep a spiritual journal, start or continue a Christian meditation or prayer practice, and /or review and contemplate this baptismal covenant found in the Baptism liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer. I am not suggesting that you try to do all of these in one Lent!

Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. May your Lent be a blessed time of renewal and prayer and may it lead you into ever deeper relationships with God and with others. Amen.