



One quick glance at the calendar for this February will show you a very curious juxtaposition for the beginning of Lent: Ash Wednesday is on February 14th. Valentine's Day. The day of roses, hearts, love notes, and chocolates meets the evening of ashes, confessions of sin, and blessed meditations upon the cross of Jesus Christ. This might put a bit of a dampener upon flower sales this year!

Yet if we think about this a little bit longer, there is a great connection between Love and Lenten Passion. God's Love! Christ's Passion! To save us from our sins! Listen to this passage of love from our Lord in Isaiah:

"Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.

"And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield only wild grapes?" (Is.5:1-4 ESV).

The Lord sings of His vineyard, that is, His precious people Israel. His heart has gone out to her. He called her to be a nation when they were not a nation. From one man, Abraham, the nation was made and formed and given life, life with a Promise! This nation would be numerous, and from this nation shall come the Blessing for all nations.

Yet for all that the Lord did for His beloved, Israel did not return that love. The Hebrew for 'wild grapes' doesn't quite translate politely. These grapes yielded by the beloved vines are rancid, worthless, hard, and stinking fruit. Those kinds of grapes cannot make *"wine that gladdens the heart of man"* (Psalm 104:15); they aren't even good for animals. What kind of valentine is that for the Lord?

Israel of old is not alone in this indictment. Our love for the Lord is just as lacking. Our hearts

are full of the exact same selfish sins. God our Father gives us life, gives us breath, He has given us a wonderful country to live freely within, granted us the blessings of family and friends and a blessed congregation of saints to be encouraged by, and how do we answer the Lord's love for us? We reject His valentines of love and blessing all because we want what we want for me, myself, and I. We are hopeless sinners!

Yet even in this our Lord's Love knows no bounds as He knows exactly how to save us:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules," (Ezekiel 36:25-27 ESV).

Ash Wednesday is the perfect day to receive our heavenly Father's valentine! His love is given to us in this: He doesn't simply show us our sins and cause us only to grieve them, but our Father also shows us His Son, Jesus, who saves us from those sins! Those nail marks Jesus bore on the cross paid for our sins. That wound in Jesus' side bespeaks the blood poured out to give us new and eternal life! The Sacrament of the Altar beckons us to receive full remission of all our sins, giving us that new heart and the Holy Spirit to cleanse us and make us true, forgiven children of the heavenly Father!

The best valentine we can give our Triune God then is to humbly receive these wondrous gifts from His hand and truly believe His Word of Absolution. May His unending love surround us and those we love all our days!

In Christ's Service,
Rev Joel V Kuhl, Pastor