

Dear Friends in Christ,

This year Ash Wednesday falls on *Valentine's Day, a day that was originally a commemoration of a 3rd century priest and martyr during the reign of the Emperor Claudius. While little is known about Valentine, there is even a debate about which martyr named Valentine the day actually commemorates, many legends surround the day. These in part have led to Valentine's Day as we know it in our modern day—a day for cards, candy, hearts, and flowers- a celebration of love.

As I prepare for this Ash Wednesday, I am aware that for many it will be overshadowed by Valentine's Day, if they are aware of it at all.

However, I am struck this year that Ash Wednesday is also a celebration of love, albeit a countercultural one. My generation grew up with the cultural narrative that "love means you never have to say you're sorry" an axiom from what is the most famous line in the book and screenplay Love Story by Erich Segal. In the early 70's this motto was proclaimed on posters and T-shirts. I even remember singing a song in high school choir with these words.

While I know this references dates me, I believe this is one of the false narratives that remains in our society, a narrative that is often expressed by words and actions that show no care for anyone but oneself. I would submit that love is precisely what causes one to say they are sorry because of our care for the beloved. If we did not love but were rather simply indifferent, the true opposite of love, why would we bother to say we are sorry at all.

Ash Wednesday reminds us that part of our love for God is saying we are sorry—sorry for the pride and hypocrisy in our lives, sorry for our participation in the unjust structures of this world, sorry for past actions and past inactions. This sorrow is the result of our reminder that we are creatures and not the creator. That realization causes us to examine our actions and leads us to sorrow for how we have acted and behaved. We say we are sorry because of our love for God and God's ways and because we know that our confession and sorrow will be met with a word of grace. God pardons and absolves those who truly repent.

Repentance is the beginning of being renewed in our love for God and the things of God. It is the prerequisite for being perfected in love by God's grace.

I invite you, as you see the Valentine's Day displays over this next week, to remember God's love for you. It is a love beyond and above all loves. It is a love that lays down its life for others. It is the love that is described in Paul's great meditation on the cross in the 13th chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians. Reading it might just be the preparation for both Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day.

Yours in Christ,

The Rt. Rev. Steven Andrew Miller
Bishop of Milwaukee

*It should be noted that Valentine does not appear on the calendar of the Book of Common Prayer rather February 14 is the feast of Saints Cyril and Methodius missionaries and evangelists to the Slavic people.)