



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092
(262)241-3121 www.stjohnsmequon.org
Email: office@stjohnsmequon.org
Pastor James Tiefel
(262) 853-9723 (cell#)
Email: pastortiefel@gmail.com

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2024

Sermon

Joel 2:12-19

“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, “Spare your people, LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’ ”

Then the LORD was jealous for his land and took pity on his people. The LORD replied to them: “I am sending you grain, new wine and olive oil, enough to satisfy you fully; never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations.”

He was only eight years old but he was absolutely in love! She sat in the row next to his about two desks down. She wasn't the prettiest girl in the class; some of the boys laughed about how she looked. She had a strange sounding voice and couldn't always put her words in the right order. But he loved her ever since kindergarten. The trouble was, she didn't like him. If she wasn't insulting him, she was ignoring him. He didn't care. So yesterday he counted up his birthday money, walked down to Walgreens, and bought the biggest and most beautiful Valentine's Day card he could find. He signed it, put it in the envelope, and drew a big heart under her name. He placed it on her desk this morning. She opened the card, read it, and turned around to look at him. The question is: Did she smile or did she frown?

It doesn't happen often, but every once in a while, Ash Wednesday and Valentines Day both fall on February 14. There aren't many days on the Christian calendar that seem less like Valentines Day. No red tonight; only black. No flowers; just ashes. On Valentine's Day, some boyfriends take the knee to ask their girlfriends for marriage. Christians sink to their knees to confess their sins. We Lutherans have learned to confess our sins. We confess every time we speak the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us our trespasses, but there are other petitions to pray. We confess our sins almost every Sunday at the beginning of worship, but there are other things to do. On Ash Wednesday confession becomes the focus of worship. More than on most other days it fills our thoughts and guides our actions. Confession is not pleasant; it is serious and somber. I invited you to confess your sins tonight with this: “Let us be silent. Let us be still.”

He is the Ancient of Days, God from all eternity, and he is absolutely in love with us. He sees us every hour of every day. We aren't beautiful; in fact, we're ugly because of our sins. We often say things that are hateful and hurtful or just plain stupid. God loved us even before we were born and he still loves us even though we have often ignored him and insulted him. He counted the cost of sending us a message of love. The cost was

incalculable but he paid the price without thinking twice. Tonight, the prophet Joel is laying this message, this card before us. We are going to open it and we are going to find:

The Lord's Ash Wednesday Valentine

Joel wrote these words while God was carrying out a spiritual housecleaning. For decades the people of Israel had been worshiping the idol Baal under the lead of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Eventually, Baal worship began to seep down into the kingdom of Judah, too. God started the housecleaning by wiping out Ahab's royal family but the common people didn't come around. So God sent a message in a plague of locusts—grasshoppers. This wasn't just picture language; these were real grasshoppers and they destroyed everything. The message was clear: You want to get rid of the grasshoppers, turn away from that ugly idol Baal and come back to me.

These grasshoppers were real, but Joel was identifying a deeper reality: If you think the grasshoppers are bad, **The day of the Lord is great, it is dreadful. Who can endure it?** This is where we get into the story, all of us. My father was 16 when the grasshoppers landed in Nebraska. The plague was real to him; he would tell us how awful it was. But it was never real to me; I don't think I'd ever seen a grasshopper. That's what happens sometimes when we sin—we don't take sin all that seriously. Of course we sin; so does everybody. Nobody's perfect. Anyway, God forgives my sins. The Lord is more serious about sin than that. Sin is bad. Sin is a disease we inherit which nothing can cure. The disease produces pimples and pus that oozes out of the pores of our sinful nature. Even the little sins, even the silent sins—are revolting and disgusting to God. They show our disobedience and disloyalty. They disconnect us and divide us from God. God wants us back before sin destroys us.

So we open the Lord's Ash Wednesday valentine and we find what is really a message of love. **"Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."** Turning away from our sin takes honesty and humility. Joel calls it **fasting, weeping, and mourning**. We may not go without food or dissolve into tears, but we must consider sin to be what it really is and we must admit that we are really guilty. Going through the motions won't do it. Little changes won't work. Words aren't enough. Joel wrote: **Repent your heart and not your garments**. God wants us to turn away from the disaster of our sins. He wants us to find the delight of his forgiveness. And so God pleads with us: Please be my valentine: **Return to the Lord your God**.

So that little girl in the second grade finds another valentine on her desk from a boy in the fifth grade. It's an enchanting card, but she doesn't know this boy; she doesn't recognize his name and she can't imagine what he looks like. She knows the boy who sent the other card; he sits right behind her. And that's the way it is with us and God. When we turn away from sin and return to God, we never see someone we don't know. The Lord's valentine says: **Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity**. There aren't enough words in any human language to describe the way God feels about us. Love is the critical word. God's love is unselfish. Grace is undeserved love, compassion is pitying love. And God's love is active love. St. John wrote, **This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins**. The call to change our ways never stands alone. Jesus always says, **Repent and believe the good news**. The good news is that Jesus Christ came to earth to obey what we could not and to die so we would not. No matter what we do—change or not change, return or not return, believe or not believe—God's love in Christ always stays the same. Joel asked a question: **Who knows?** But there is no doubt or guess in his question. It's like the dad who says to his kids, Who knows? We may go to Disney World. And Joel says, You know: **God will turn and relent and leave behind a blessing**. God pleads with us: Please be my valentine; I will love you forever.

So the little boy placed his valentine on the little girl's desk and I posed this question: Did she turn around and smile or turn around and frown? When God presents us with his valentine, Joel urges us to turn around and smile. God forgives us with the deepest and broadest and highest love, a love no one can imagine or imitate, and we turn to him with the kind of pleasure a scared little boy feels when he spies his lost mommy in the grocery store. Being with God becomes the **absolute priority** in our lives. This is what Joel urged: **Blow the trumpet, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly; bring together the elders and the children and the babies; even the**

bridegroom leaves the bride in her chamber. Nothing is more important than being with God. Nothing compares to being with Jesus. We take sin seriously every day; we ask God's forgiveness every day. We see God's love in his Word and in our baptisms every day. We find comfort in his body and blood whenever the sacrament is offered. Like the Old Testament priests who ministered before the Lord, **we weep between the temple portico and the altar.** Like them we say **Spare your people Lord.** The Lord presents us with a love letter of grace: **The Lord takes pity on his people.** And we turn to him with a smile.

I wonder how many of you know that there really was a St. Valentine. In fact, there were several St. Valentines in the ancient church. They all lived during early Christian persecutions and they all died as martyrs. They became famous because of the compassion they showed to people under persecution. Since at least the eighth century people have remembered their love on February 14. It didn't take long before St. Valentine's Day became associated with flowers and candy and fancy cards—which is what we have today.

Tonight, on this Ash Wednesday, the Lord has reached out to us with a message of lasting love. Because he loves us, he urges us to turn away from the love of sin and all its sinful sidekicks. Because he sent his Son to die and because he forgives us in love, the Lord invites us to turn to him in faith and to be his own. But he does this more often than on Ash Wednesday. The love we have seen tonight is a love God shows us all the time. So the message tonight is really the Lord's **everyday** valentine: Please be mine and I will love you forever. Pray God we turn to him every day with the smile of faith. Amen.

The sermon was preached by Pastor James Tiefel.