

A valentine from God

By Elizabeth A. Eaton



“Love means never having to say you’re sorry” (*Love Story*).

“Forgiveness guaranteed. Repentance optional” (sign in front of a Lutheran church).

This year Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day fall on the same date. It seems like an odd pairing—Ash Wednesday, a day of solemn repentance and honest reckoning of our brokenness, and Valentine’s Day, a lighthearted celebration of love. Do we fast and pray and commit to rigorous spiritual disciplines, or do we dive in to Champagne and chocolate? Is it a day of contrition or of abandon? Do we abstain or do we indulge?

It’s strange how our culture divides up human experience and the way it puts a premium on happiness, self-fulfillment and conflict avoidance, particularly in personal relationships. The good life is untroubled. There should be no worries and certainly no cause to acknowledge pain or wrong. It’s a life of endless possibility fueled by positive thinking and affirmation. It should be perky, upbeat and fun. And somehow love needs to be shaped the same way. Certainly there is no room for Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day in the same space.

The two quotes above are the manifesto for this worldview. They hold out the promise of pain-free, investment-free, responsibility-free relationships. They encourage an unexamined life, a kind of Teflon existence to which consequences don’t stick. They sound like the real thing but are as poor a substitute as the sentiments printed on the little sugar valentine hearts are for a real expression of love. In this world, Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day make no sense together. But here we are. This Feb. 14 will hold two holy days. And, in our life in Christ, they aren’t incompatible but inseparable.


The history of salvation is one extended love story between God and God’s creation, between God and humankind, between God and God’s people. We were created in love for love. Real love.

Love that is solid and deep and unflinching. Love that is true enough to be honest.

God’s work of reconciliation in Christ is God’s eyes-wide-open acknowledgment of human rebellion and sin, the undeniable fact that all is not well no matter how hard we try to fix it or deny it. The remedy was the all-in, complete love of the incarnation, crucifixion and death of Christ. Jesus meets us right in the middle of our pain—the pain we feel and the pain we cause others—and without minimizing the depth of our offense, offers forgiveness and new life. Love does *not* mean never having to say you’re sorry—love means being *able* to say you’re sorry.

Lutherans point out that grace is a gift, but sometimes we get a little carried away. I believe the sign in front of one of our congregations that claimed “Forgiveness guaranteed. Repentance optional” was trying to announce good news. Instead, it sent passers-by in the wrong direction. Our reconciled new life in Christ not only makes it possible for us to strip away any illusion of a whole and holy life that we bring about by ourselves, it compels us to repent.

Theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned us about this cheap grace. He wrote: “Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate” (*The Cost of Discipleship*).

So, Ash Wednesday is a valentine from God, one that invites us to enter deep into the mystery of true love, honest examination of our lives and the possibility of real repentance. The Ash Wednesday valentine starts us on the journey to the cross, to the passionate love of God shown in the Passion of Christ. And after the cross, the resurrection. No more pretense, freedom. 

A monthly message from the presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Her email address: bishop@elca.org.

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