

Looking for God's love: When Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine's Day

Every year my sons and I spend time picking their valentines for school.

Whether we make their cards or buy them off the shelf, we always consider the options carefully. One of many lessons I have learned as a mother is that not just any valentine will do. You can't choose Pokemon valentines over Star Wars without serious consideration.

When our boys bring home the valentines from their classmates, it's clear why picking just the right ones to give matters so much. An elementary school student uses his valentines to make a statement about himself, sharing what he enjoys with others.

This year, though, Valentine's Day will be a little different. This year, Ash Wednesday falls on the same day. Although we can exchange sweet notes any time, the usual sugar-coated fun doesn't fit into a day of fasting, abstinence, and penance.

But just because we will be separating chocolate hearts and cupcakes from Ash Wednesday doesn't mean we can't be thinking of Valentine's Day on the day that begins our 40-day journey to Easter. In fact, it seems like a wonderful opportunity to think of what love means to our Lenten journey.

On an ordinary Valentine's Day, it can be easy to view love as something that happens in sweet Hallmark moments, framed by sunshine and flowers and hearts. And it is true that we find love in happy times. At those times, it is easy to love.

But when Valentine's Day falls on the first day of Lent, we are challenged to consider love in the greatest act of love—Love hanging on the cross on Good Friday. That love isn't easy. It doesn't fit on a valentine. It's that love that we keep front and center during Lent.

Love is Jesus taking up his cross and carrying it.

Love is our Lord and Savior dying for us.

For each of us, loving others and serving God through our love can require suffering and sacrifice. Love can mean skipping sleep to care for a sick child. Love can mean embracing a marriage vow through the difficult times. Love can mean stretching yourself when you feel you have nothing left to give. Love can mean recognizing the crosses others are carrying and trying to lighten their loads. Love can mean walking through the darkest times, searching for hope and faith.

“Love to be real, it must cost. It must hurt,” said Saint Teresa of Calcutta. “It must empty us of self.”

That’s the love we see on the cross. That’s the love we try to emulate. It’s powerful, and it’s hard.

Still, even as we keep an eye on the cross, maybe Lent is also a time to recognize how Jesus accompanies us with His love through this penitential season. We don’t walk this journey to Good Friday alone. God is embracing us in His love along the way.

After all, He loves us so much, so deeply, that we can encounter His love in a moment of sunshine, a swirling snow flurry, the laughter of a child, a hug from a friend, a beautiful song, or a moment of quiet.

Those signs of love, and Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice and expression of love, tell us even more about the Giver and our relationship with Him than the paper valentines my sons will sign and deliver.

As St. John Paul II said, “Open your minds and hearts to the beauty of all that God has made and to His special, personal love for each one of you.”

So as we focus on deepening our love for others and for Jesus this Lent, let’s also allow ourselves be open to the love our Lord offers to us in a thousand personal valentines He sends to each of us every single day.