

**Psalm 51:1-12** <sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. <sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my sin, and cleanse me of my guilt. <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. <sup>4</sup> Against you alone have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. <sup>5</sup> Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when I was conceived. <sup>6</sup> You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. <sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow... <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness; let my crushed bones rejoice. <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my guilt, and blot out all my sin. <sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from your presence, nor strip me of your Holy Spirit. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

**I John 4:7-12** <sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Psalm 51:1-12 and I John 4:7-12

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Ash Wednesday: “There’s Love In All This”

Rev. Amy Terhune

What a strange day. The stores are full of heart-shaped boxes of chocolates and sweet-smelling long-stem roses while the church proclaims today to be the beginning of a season of simplicity and self-denial, when we traditionally give up the joys of chocolate and decadence of long-stem roses. But the two are not as far apart as appearances would seem to suggest. The truth is that both Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day celebrate love stories. But that needs a little fleshing out, so consider this. Unlike Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, or Pentecost, Ash Wednesday is not a holiday that marks a specific historic occurrence. At Christmas, we celebrate Christ’s birth – God incarnate, coming in the flesh to be one of us, to show us the way to live and relate to God and to each other. At Good Friday, we remember Christ’s death, which is also the death of sin’s power over us. At Easter, we celebrate Christ’s resurrection, and our freedom to live as redeemed people. At Pentecost, we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, which continues to lead, inspire, challenge, and guide. These represent the great Christian story of what God has done for humanity. But what about Ash Wednesday. It’s not historic. Oh, it has a long history, going back at least 1500 years, but the day marks no great historical moment. Rather, it remains, after all these centuries, intensely personal. Today is my day; your day; our day to own the story of our faith. And we do that by admitted that we need it. We need the incarnate Christ to show us how to live. We need the crucified Christ to save us from our sin. We need the risen Christ to free us for life and service. We need the Holy Spirit to journey with us all the time. We need God. So we start with Ashes—a symbol of mortality and of sinfulness—to remind ourselves again that we’re human, we’re broken, we’re entangled in sin, and we need this.

As I say that, I recall lines from an old Gordon Lightfoot song that I loved growing up. It’s not very “Valentinesy”, I admit, but it’s poignant. It goes like this:

If I could read your mind, love, what a tale your thoughts could tell.

Just like a paperback novel – the kind the drugstores sell.

When you reach the part where the heartaches come, the hero would be me,

But heroes often fail.

And you won't read that book again because the ending's just too hard to take.\nAnd I'd walk away like a movie star who gets burned in a three-way script.  
Enter number two:  
A movie queen to play the scene of bringing all the good things out in me.  
But for now love, let's be real.  
[from <https://genius.com/Gordon-lightfoot-if-you-could-read-my-mind-lyrics>]

Today is about being real. It's about knowing our place and embracing humility. Keep in mind that humility is not humiliation. Humility is rooted in the term 'humble' and indicates a mindset—a proper and healthy understanding of our place in relationship to God, as in God is God and we are not. The opposite of humility is arrogance. We need humility. But humiliation is a power ploy whereby one is made to feel shame, disgrace, worthlessness, or insignificance. Its opposite is dignity. And I assure you that while God desires our humility, God never intended humankind to be without dignity. Indeed, that is the point and thrust of this season. There's love in all this – all we do today. For Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, to prove both his love for us, and our worth in his eyes.

This is a serious time, for we are confronted with the fact that we are sinful creatures in need of redemption. Our sin is dark. Our guilt is sobering. We dare not look past this reality. And during Lent, we talk a lot about repentance—a term we dare not misunderstand. Repentance may be understood two ways. First, it means turn. One of the commands any ancient Roman soldier would have known was 'Repent!' It wasn't theological—it meant to do an about-face and march in the opposite direction. So to repent is to turn around, to strike out in a new direction, but it's more than that. The word translated as repentance in our scriptures is, in the original Greek, *metanoia*. *Meta* means 'new' and *noia* means 'mind'. In Latin, it's *repenser*—to re-think. To repent, then, is not merely to go in a new direction, but to have one's mind and heart made new. It is to take on the mind of Christ. To own the story of our faith begins with acknowledging our need, but it continues with placing ourselves, our lives, and all we hold dear in Christ's hands for Christ's shaping touch. We do so in faith, knowing that we are loved. We are precious. We are created good. And in God's eyes, we are worth redeeming, worth saving, worth investing both sweat and blood. Lent is about God's plans for us—to make us new and to reclaim us from darkness. So when I say that today celebrates a love story, it is the greatest love story ever told: the love of God for humanity.

So let me conclude with a love story that shows us about what it means to own the story, to place ourselves into Christ's hands and Christ's story; to have the mind that was in Christ. I've told it before. I'll tell it again. Because it never gets old. It's about a little boy named Chad, who wanted to make a valentine for each kid in his class. His mother wished he wouldn't because she'd know how much difficulty Chad had socially—how he was often left out and not included in games among his classmates. But this was a big deal to Chad. He was insistent, so she went along with it. Every night for a week, Chad worked, painstakingly constructing 35 valentines – one for each child in his class.

Valentine's Day dawned and Chad was beside himself with excitement! He carefully stacked them up, put them in a bag, and bolted out the door. When he got home that afternoon, his mother was waiting for him. From the window, she watched him dawdling along behind the other kids and worried secretly that he might not have gotten any valentines. And what little Chad said made her eyes sting and seemed to confirm her fears.

"Not a one ... not a one," he muttered as he came in the door. It took her a moment to recognize the glow on his face or the sense of glee in his voice. Instead, her heart sunk until she heard him add: "I didn't forget a one, not a single one!" [story adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, "Love", *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1,501 Other Stories*, (Nashville: Word Publishing) 2000, c1998.]

Beloved, God doesn't forget a single one either. You are precious. You are loved. You are forgiven. You are redeemed. That is the greatest love story ever told, and that is why there's love in all this. Amen.