

B Ash Wednesday 2.14.24
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Focus Statement: Jesus loves you.

The book I'm reading right now is called *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. It sounds like an exercise in laziness, but it's actually this really interesting argument about all the things in society that captures our attention, and how to reclaim our attention to focus in on what really matters. It's less about doing nothing than it is about learning to choose what we do, about opening our attention and focus to what really matters. I share this with you because I was reading it last night and came in this morning and rewrote my whole Ash Wednesday sermon for today, because she highlighted so concisely in talking about a completely different topic, what I was trying to say, which is what is the point of this strange worship service where we rub ash on our foreheads and tell each other that we are sinners and we are going to die.

First off, let's also acknowledge the other weird juxtaposition of this day, it's also Valentine's Day. Apologies to all of you who had to reschedule dinner plans so you could be at church tonight. Or maybe, you're welcome, because everything will be less crowded tomorrow night, but I digress. The various social media clergy groups I'm part of have been busy sharing memes with one another about the conflicting imagery of Valentine's Day Ash Wednesday. My favorites include a candy heart with the words "Remember U R" and the U and the R as single capital letters, in classic candy heart fashion, "Remember U R Dust." Another features three panels. In the first, one character asks, "What are you doing on Valentine's Day?" In the second, the other character responds, "Rubbing dirt on people's faces and telling them they are going to die." The third is just the first character staring,

incredulous and slightly horrified, at the second. So it's weird, and culturally inappropriate, on this day dedicated to heart shaped chocolates, flowers, so much pink, and romantic declarations of love, to instead come together to, in the words of the meme, rub dirt our foreheads and remember we are going to die.

It's culturally inappropriate, but it may theologically be the best day for it. Because here's the thing about Valentine's Day. And don't cast me as an unromantic here, or feel bad for Travis, I got him heart-shaped Reese's, which are his favorite, and a nice card. He's not here because he's at a hockey game, but we're going out to dinner after this, we celebrate Valentine's Day. But here's the truth any of you who have been in love for any legitimate amount of time know, Valentine's Day, while fun, is not what love is really like. Valentine's Day is the beginning of a relationship, where your knowledge of the person is still mostly made up. It's puppies and rainbows and "oh my gosh I can't believe such a perfect human could exist; you will never do anything ever that I will not find absolutely endearing." Until, of course, they forget your birthday or snore annoyingly or don't like Beyonce, and then all bets are off.

Love, on the other hand, is made of much tougher stuff. Love takes time. Love, in the words I have read at just about every wedding I've officiated, is "patient, kind; not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude." I then remind the couple that Paul was telling the Corinthians that love is those things, not that they are those things, because they, we, are often far from the ideal Paul laid out in his letter. We are frequently not patient or kind, but instead are envious, boastful, rude, irritable, all the negative characteristics Paul described as

antithetical to love. Love is tougher than Valentine's Day because love is formed in the crucible of actual human relationships. Love is caring for someone when it is hard, it's sticking it out in the times when you don't actually like them, because you made a commitment to love. It's joy, yes, it's joy, but it's also hard news and hospital beds and someone's weird in-laws—not mine, mine are delightful, but certainly someone in this room has had to navigate families, be them in-laws, children, or that one uncle—and all the struggles that come from sharing a life with another person. And, to be clear, another thing Valentine's Day leaves out, is that love is not always, or even often, romantic. Love is not the sole property of couples. We have this weird, hard, sticky, and determined love with our children, with other members of our family, with friends, within our church community. You are people who show up in love for each other all the time, in so many ways. As your pastor, I know you don't always like each other, I can tell. You get on each other's nerves, you step on each other's toes, you have misunderstandings and get frustrated with one another. It's part of human interaction. But you come to bat for each other when the chips are down because you are a congregation who loves. Which is, I think, what church at its best is about. Church isn't a place where relationships are easy, because it's full of people. And people are broken, it's the human condition. What church is, what church could be, and I think at its best should be, is a place where unconditional love is practiced. Where we practice grace by loving each other even when we are unlovable. Because let's be real, no one is delightful all the time. Church at its best is the place where we love each other and the world not because it's easy, but because it is how God first loves us.

Which gets us back to Ash Wednesday, and my book about attention. Because everything we are doing this evening, is about focusing us in on ourselves, so that we can get past ourselves to see God's love for us, and through us for the world. After this sermon and our hymn, we will enter into a long time of confession. And confession is a funny thing, because it can feel like, why do we need to tell God all the bad stuff we've done. If God is just going to forgive us anyway, is the telling actually necessary? Or is this just some sort of trick, where God is secretly keeping a tally of everything we say, to later hold it against us? We're doing confession in the middle of the service tonight, during Lent we will be starting each service with confession, and you may wonder, isn't this kind of a dark and depressing way to start worship, by reflecting on how bad we are? Shouldn't we welcome people in with something happy?

It could be dark if you focus only on that part. But remember, worship is about opening us up to God's love. We all bring with us to worship things that separate us, hold us back, from God's love. Mistakes we've made throughout the week, worries we're carrying, things we wish we'd done, or really wish we hadn't. And sometimes it feels like if we ignore those things, then they will just go away. But they don't, do they. They fester. So God, through the liturgy, gives us this gift of time where we can name them, acknowledge them, be honest about them and their power over us, and then hear again the promise that God really does lift those things away. Confession and forgiveness is truly about giving us the space and grace to enter into worship with lightened hearts and spirits, so that we have room to carry the love and care that God is trying to pour into us. Love that we can't hold if our hands and hearts are full of concerns. This confession and forgiveness is longer than a normal Sunday

not because God wants to make sure you are super aware of all the possible ways you've screwed up, but because it's trying to find a hook point for every person in the room. We all come in with different worries, and this long confession is hoping to give each of us a place to say, yes, that, that right there is the hurt I'm holding, so that the words of forgiveness can then lift that hurt away.

We go from the confession into the imposition of ashes. The ashes are made from the burned palms we carried in triumphant praise of God on Palm Sunday. Remember almost a year ago now when we marched into the sanctuary waving palm fronds, shouting our praise to Jesus, and loudly singing "All Glory, Laud, and Honor"? The ashes you are about to wear are made from those very palms. Those ashes remind us that our praise can be fickle, and yet God still shows up for us. The words you'll hear, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," remind us of how in Genesis, God formed Adam, and forms all of us, from the dust of the earth. The word Adam in Hebrew in fact, is not a name. It means "Dust creature." We are all dust creatures, formed from the stuff of the earth. The elements and minerals that course through our veins are the same ones that have coursed through every living thing, human, plant animal, from the smallest worm to the mighty dinosaur, the very same stuff that the planet is made of. We are dust, and we will one day return to the earth and be dust again. The world God created is a giant recycling project, of which our bodies are just a small part. We feel like we are the center of the universe with our big brains and our big buildings and our abilities to think big thoughts. We cause damage on a global scale because we feel ourselves more powerful than the planet from which we came.

But the truth of these words is that we are mortals, earth-bound, time-bound creatures. We came from this earth, and we will return to it, and other life will grow from our ashes.

And. And we make the dust in the sign of the cross to remember that, even as true as every I just said is, there is at work a still larger truth. The truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The truth that Jesus took on the same mortal flesh as us. Lived a life in our same constrained state. Was handed over to the authorities who acted as if they had power over him, suffered death on a cross, and was buried... And on the third day rose again, so that death would have no power over us. This ashy cross is a sign that we will die, and that death will not have the last word, because in the words of our funeral liturgy, even at the grave we make our song Alleluia.

We go forward from this place, marked with a sign of God's love. A sign, I remind you, that makes visible on this day what is true for you every day, that you have been sealed with the love of God and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Today that cross will be in black ash for the world to see. But every day that cross is there—for it was etched on your head at your baptism—this mark of God on you can never be shaken. Because love is made of tougher stuff than that. Thanks be to God, who loves us. Amen.