

Love to Live (14Feb18 – Ash Wed)
John 6:22-35, 49-54

We are now living into one of the most unusual gaps, what to me is among the most uncertain periods of the year. I don't mean the season of Lent and how you'll survive without whatever you might be giving up. It's not the lead-up to Jesus' crucifixion and whether we pretend the whole thing catches us by surprise year after year.

What I mean by strange times, of course, is the wait until you can see your ashes in a mirror. (Maybe I'm more vain than most this way?)

The Boundary Waters does some of the same thing to me. I wonder for the week how my scruffy facial hair grows in in patches, and what in God's good earth is happening amid the unwashed unkempt mass of hair on top of my head, as well as what having no warm soapy water might be doing to my face.

But even that week canoeing in the wilderness and waiting to glimpse a mirror back in society is in some ways smaller than what we're sharing right now, this gap of time with an uncertain dark smudge on your forehead and waiting to see how it looks on you.

Maybe there's a chance you'd already forgotten that you had that sooty smear stuck above your gaze, but for me this always makes me feel self-conscious. Not quite as if the ashes are re-burning a mark on me, but just that I must be so conspicuous, and don't know how I look to others, and can't do anything about it.

My self-absorption extends after I've seen myself in the mirror, with the remaining question about whether to wash off the cross and try to scrub my face clean, or if I continue to wear it. And if others see me, is it a mark of my sinfulness? Or a bold witness to faith? How am I supposed to think about these ashes that have been imposed on my skin and on my life?

This Ash Wednesday deep black, shimmery shadow on our faces seems so penetratingly to provoke our intense self-inquiry and self-examination: What is it that others can see in us but we can't directly see in ourselves without this

opportunity to wait and reflect? Does it appear prejudiced or hypocritical? How dirty do we look to those around us, with the smears and blemishes of our imperfections? We figure we can frequently cover up those spots, but that the time of Lent lays them bare, as stark as the mark on our foreheads, to be followed by repentance, by that earnest desire to clean up our act and try to do better. That may be the intensity of how these ashes burden our brows.

Or, in a slightly more favorable light, maybe you approach Lent with the eagerness of a chance to recommit. Maybe that strong, deep cross on your forehead feels like devotion, like a badge that declares your spiritual practice, your disciplines. You may take up that cross even when it has an edge of shame and the world might scorn you for choosing this narrow path.

Or maybe in what feels like the largest and most ominous aspect of this, you feel the weight of those ashes for the sign of death, as if it's already seeping out from inside you, that fatality cannot be kept at bay and this morbid mark is closing in on you. You are fragile and impermanent. And that terminal pressure means you're left with an ever-more limited window of opportunity to accomplish what you need to, to be what you feel you should be, to become satisfied with what you see in the mirror.

But amid that intensity and weight, and before you get to feeling too glum, or pondering if you should feel gloomier for this day, I want to reorient us. Partly it comes from our Bible reading, and partly is emphasized by the coincidence of this Ash Wednesday with Valentine's Day. On this V-ash-entine Wednesday (or whatever we might call it—I hadn't come up with a great term yet), we have to consider love for this life.

So looking in the mirror for love, clearly none of us wants to be so self-centered and enamored of ourselves that we wind up like Narcissus in Greek mythology who was so captivated and enthralled by his own reflection that it forever immobilized him in selfish love. That's not what we'd hope for as we gazed at our reflection, even

if for now the view in the mirror might come with some discomfort or displeasure, even if the outlook of our reality can seem bleak.

But if it's not only how favorably we view ourselves in the reflection, then it must be about how we're seen by someone else, how we are perceived as beloved by another.

That's a totally different perspective. One of the first things I notice is that others, those who love me, don't see me the way I see myself. I'm apt to see the faults, the concerns, the errors, all of the ways I wish I were so much better. But being seen with loving eyes isn't about how much I need to change. It's loving me already. And even if it's not exactly or always loving my blemishes or my brokenness, still, very clearly I am seen for who I am and still loved with celebration of my life.

And that's certainly where we begin this season of Lent, with a reading from the Gospel of John. John over and over wants to remind you you are unconditionally loved. Much more clearly than the other gospels, for John love isn't what you're told to do but what you first receive. Here are just a couple highlights: for God so loved the world (3:16). Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end, to the ultimate (13:1). As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love (15:9).

And, most important for today: no one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for another (15:13).

So if you're feeling that smudge on your forehead as a sign of death, that is not primarily your death, but a reminder of a death for you, of Jesus who laid down his life in love. If you're waiting to see that ashen smear emblazoned on your skin, you may know that it's there as a reminder and mark of love. Vashentine Wednesday isn't only about the sweet and romantic love of reds and pinks. That on your head is very truly a Valentine from Jesus, the cross as the image of how he loves you completely, love in black. In giving life for you to take away your death is how God's love is manifest.

And no box of chocolates here, Jesus gives himself as bread. "I AM the bread of life, and the bread that I give you for your life and for the life of the world is my flesh." That isn't a mark of your rottenness or your death on your forehead. It is the mark of the one who dies to give you life, who nourishes your existence with his love, who even with this bread tonight offers himself to you, wholly, body and soul, and all.

When you go out from here, for this season, for all your days, if you look in the mirror and can see you are so loved, for any of your imperfect impermanence, then you look just exactly right.