

**Ash Wednesday 2018**

**And So It Goes**

**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH**

In the late 1980's, the award-winning songwriting team of Paul Overstreet and Don Schlitz wrote a sweet little song that is good one for today called *And So It Goes*. The song's chorus is especially appropriate as the words are: "Ashes to ashes, dust into dust, buildings will crumble, and bridges will rust; mountains will disappear, and rivers will dry up, and so it goes, with everything but love."

Since today is both Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day, I thought of that song because it is about how everything in this world from palaces to kingdoms to buildings to mountains and rivers is only temporary, all of it will be dust one day. Which is what we remember on Ash Wednesday; that every life, including our own, will end one day, when we who were made from the dust of the earth will return to that dust. Today we also remember that although our lives on this earth are temporary, God who made the earth and everything in it loves us and claims us for God's own. And in that reminder, which today looks like the sign of the cross made in ashes on our foreheads, we find hope. Like how the song claims that the only thing in this world that lasts, that is forever, is love, which is what is celebrated on Valentine's Day.

But perhaps there are some of us here tonight who take issue with the song and its sentiment. Especially if we have been in relationships that have ended. I have friends who recently agreed to end their 3-year relationship. This is a sad time for them, as they were incredibly happy when they came together, and both of them made sacrifices in order to do so. One of my friends told me what she learned from this relationship is that people can have different understandings of what love is. For one of my friends, love is about sacrifice, about walking with another person, following through on what you say you are going to do, and expressing your love in words and actions. For my other friend who was in that same relationship, love is about control in the form of a blessing from God. She believes that if God loves her, God will bless her with things like a job, which provides money that can purchase a house and a life for her and her partner and family. Because she believed she had the blessing, she believed she had the power to control where the family lives, and decide what they do together. To her, that is what love looks like: God blesses her with prosperity, so she blesses her family. The problem was when this friend lost her job, she could no longer provide and saw this loss as a deeply spiritual loss indicating God no longer was blessing her because God no longer loved her.

For my friends, their two different ways of understanding what love is led to the end of their relationship. And they aren't the only ones who have different ways of explaining or defining love. Lots of songs and poems and stories have been written to try and define that one little word.

Bette Midler sang a popular song about love in the 1980's called *The Rose*, maybe some of you know it. It is mostly a sad song that starts out with metaphors describing love as a river that drowns a tender reed, a razor that leaves the soul bleeding, and an endlessly aching hunger. But despite the song's rather oppressive beginning, it ends on the lovely hopeful metaphor that love is a flower and you are its only seed.

Newberry award winning author and Episcopalian, the late Madeline L'engle has written in her autobiography *The Irrational Season* that "Love is the greatest risk a person can take."

So far, most definitions of love I've mentioned are pretty harsh sounding and touch on love's dark side, the side where we remember love requires us to be vulnerable, which means a person can get hurt. Singer and songwriter John Denver wrote a beautiful and a little more balanced view of love in his song *Perhaps Love*. Written during a time of personal turmoil when his marriage with his first wife was ending, he said that part of how he worked through a time of his life when he wasn't feeling loved was by reflecting on the many different ways people think of love. In his song, he describes love as like "a resting place, a place of comfort and warmth; and like an open window or doorway, wanting draw you closer and to show you more, it is like a cloud or as strong as steel or a way of living or a way to feel or holding on or letting go, and some say they don't know". When John was through writing this song, he said he had come to realize that love really was all of those things.

Perhaps some of you are familiar with the book by C. S. Lewis, one of if not the greatest Christian apologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, called *The Four Loves*, in which he explored the nature of love. Lewis wrote in the introduction of his book that at first, he thought this would be a pretty easy task, only the more he thought about love, the harder it got to explain, especially when he started with love itself. He also wrote that he believed when individuals try to define love for themselves, the result would be dangerous. I believe what he meant by that is what my friends are experiencing as their relationship is ending.

The starting point for C. S. Lewis in his book wasn't love itself, it was God. Lewis started his exploration of love with the Gospel of John, whose author states that God is love, and Lewis wrote that when we humans forget that, love can become a god, and when we let love become a god, that is when we allow what we love to have power over us, or, in Lewis' words that is when love becomes a demon. This is what keeps people in abusive relationships, or influences people to use love to manipulate or hurt. Or what turns love into some shallow sentiment, or worse, it can bring out fear. Lewis warned that when we let love become our god, then what we love can end up destroying us, and can turn into hatred and become an agent of sin by destroying life instead of creating or giving life. However, Lewis also wrote the converse is true; that when we try to understand love first by remembering God is love, then human love in all its many forms can indeed become a way to make that which is divine, God, known.

And that brings us back to today: when Ash Wednesday, a day that reminds us of our imminent death, and Valentine's Day, a day about love, happening on the same day, which may not be as contrary as some might think. In tonight's Gospel reading from Matthew we heard the words about practicing what we believe for the right intention instead of a way to get attention and that treasure and heart are connected. Ash Wednesday is also the beginning of the Church Season of Lent; a time the church gives us to examine our hearts, to look deep into ourselves and ask the tough question about love, especially the love in our own hearts: are we trying to define love for ourselves or do we start exploring love by remembering God is love? It's such a deep question that it might not be one of those questions we answer so much as it is one of those questions the poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote we live into instead. Living into that question is how we allow God into our hearts and God to – as we heard in the opening collect at the beginning of this service – create in us new hearts. Lent is the time for creating new hearts, hearts that show love by being contrite, recognizing and turning from the ways we have let love be our god instead of letting in God who is Love.

For some of us, Lent is a time to practice contrition by giving up something; like TV or Facebook or chocolate. For others it is a time to pick up and read that book on spirituality or take on the challenge of reading from the Bible every day. Others might use Lent as a time to improve their prayer life. But when we consider taking on a practice for Lent, whether it is giving something up or taking something on, only for the sake of doing so, then it is sort of like what C.S. Lewis said about love, it becomes its own god and controls us with guilt or shame when we don't do what we promised; or becomes merely a source of spiritual pride

when we manage to do what we committed to like checking off items on a daily to-do list instead of letting the practice itself be that open window or door John Denver wrote about in his song about love that wants to draw us closer to God and show us more.

Maybe the opportunity in Lent this year is to explore God is Love through a practice of your choosing, which might mean letting go of what we think love means, and letting God who is love into our hearts. Maybe the opportunity in Lent this year is to let Jesus show us, through the Bible readings in the daily office or in our Lenten devotional, or through prayer, what God is love looks like and practice embracing this love instead of trying to define pigeon hole God.

Perhaps such a practice begins with accepting the invitation to observe this time the church gives us, the invitation we will hear in just a moment. I know we all have busy lives, with so much going on, and taking on one more thing can be daunting or sound like a burden. But that could be yet another opportunity, to accept the invitation to explore God is love not as additional work, but to absorb the practice of love as part of our every day. As we walk, as we eat, as we greet the stranger or neighbor, as we live into our relationships in all their complexities, as we study and work and relax perhaps we could remember all the activities we engage in are things that are temporary, they will pass away, even turn to dust eventually, but the love with which we might engage those activities, if it starts with God is Love, might be present in all those activities, and that love is what will endure and be what is everlasting, for as the song says, so it goes, with everything but love.