

The ancient Greeks called love “the madness of the gods.” Modern psychologists define it as the strong desire for emotional union with another person. Shakespeare said, “Love is blind and lovers cannot see.” Aristotle said, “Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.”

Tonight, couples all over the country are gathering around restaurant tables with fine linen table cloths to celebrate love and commit themselves to one another. It is Valentine’s Day! But also, people of all ages are gathering around another table to celebrate love. In Churches around the world, people are gathering for Ash Wednesday, a day that with its traditional practice of fasting may be at odds with boxes of chocolate, but a day that certainly focuses our attention on love. And we gather, at this table, to commit ourselves to God through practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, practices that draw us closer to the one who loves us unconditionally.

The two days both focus on love, but certainly do it differently. Can you imagine a Hallmark card with the words of Joel? “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near – a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!” How about a conversation heart that says, “repent”? Not the romantic message one may wish to send, but a message of love none the less.

Joel is speaking out after an unparalleled locust plague just decimated their crops and livestock. He suspects that there may be more waves of calamity to come, so much so that it could very well be the end of the world. His call? Return to God. Draw close to God. He offers a tender portrait of the Lord our God, calling the people to draw close to the one who is “gracious and

merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

This is a call for today as well, for calamity is no stranger to us. Environmental calamity brings hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and fires. Economic calamity sends stock markets reeling and tramples the poor. Relational calamity stirs hatred based on the color of our skin and harbors violence based on gender. Maybe we should be sending cards from Joel instead of Hallmark, “Return to the Lord your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

This is the love we need more of, the love we need to be celebrating and sharing. The love that Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians, the love of God, who “for our sake made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God.” This is the “happy exchange” I mentioned last Sunday, that God would associate with us and take on our sin so that by our association with God, God would make us righteous.

This is the love we celebrate tonight, love that isn’t remembered by candy hearts, but by crosses of ash. Ash that reminds us of our sin and our mortality, but a cross that proclaims forgiveness and life in the midst of sin and death. And we gather around a table, an altar with a white fine linen on top. Do you know why there is a white fair linen on top? Somehow, I missed this in seminary. In the Old Testament, altars were used to make sacrifices to God to make the people right with God. They were covered in blood. But because of God’s love, because of Jesus, no more sacrifices are necessary to make us right with God, and so we cover our altars with a pure white fine linen. And we gather around this table and receive the body and blood of the one who is love for us.

The ancient Greeks called love “the madness of the gods.” *Indeed, God must be mad to love us in spite of our sin.* Modern psychologists define it as the strong desire for emotional union with another person. *It is God’s love that truly makes us one.*

Shakespeare said, “Love is blind and lovers cannot see.” *It is for love that God forgives us of our sin.* Aristotle said, “Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.” *When God’s Spirit is within us, God’s love is made complete.*