

February 14, 2018 Ash Wednesday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

(Hassidic story retold by Jacob Needleman, and from Parker Palmer's Weavings Article called Standing in the Gap.
"A Valentine from God", Elizabeth Eaton, pg 50, Living Lutheran, February 2018.)

The prophet Joel calls out: "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart."

There's an old Hassidic Jewish story, you may have heard me tell it before,

about a disciple who comes to the Rabbi asking,

Why does the Torah tell us to place these words upon our heart?

Why doesn't it tell us to place these words in our heart?

The Rabbi answers, because as we are now, our hearts are closed.

We cannot place the words in our hearts, we must place them on our hearts.

There they sit, until one day our hearts are broken and the holy words falls in.

This, dear friends, is a day for broken hearts.

Now, I know this is the wrong thing to say on Valentine's Day—completely wrong.

Hallmark and all the rest would give us shiny messages of love.

The chocolate-eers would ply us with sweet treats.

My kids will come home tonight with little Valentine bags overflowing with cards and coordinated stickers
from their classmates.

All that is good and fine, and fun, too.

But hear me out this holy day: **In the best and deepest and most profound way,**

This is a day for broken hearts,

a day for returning with all our heart to our God:

the creator of the universe,

the redeemer of our souls,

the sustainer of our very next breath.

It's a day for seeing ourselves and our world broken open

so that the holy words and the sacred ways can nestle in and make a home within us.

This may be hard to align with the marketing of Valentine's Day.

I don't however, find it hard to square with the lived experience of many of us,
and the very best of our Christian tradition.

Our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, wrote recently,

“The history of salvation is one extended love story between God and God’s creation,
between God and humankind,
between God and God’s people.”

She continued, “We are created in love for love. Real love.

Love that is solid and deep and unflinching. Love that is true enough to be honest.”

It’s in that honesty of love that today we confess our sin, our brokenness,

our separation *from* God and yearning *for* God.

It’s in that honesty of love that we mark on one another’s bodies that dusty, ashy cross
and that we hear again clearly, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

For these are words that claim us with humility,

recognizing that we are not God, but rather we are God’s own,

at once fragile and flawed, mortal, and yet resilient, filled with the Spirit of the Living God,
ready to be drawn again to God and to God’s people by the mercy of Jesus.

It’s in that honesty of love that we come to Christ’s table in our hunger, trusting we will be filled this
day, and with us, the whole world.

Our theme this Lenten season is Mystic Mercy.

We’ll explore some new and not-so-new practices that draw us deeply into the mysteries of God,
types of prayer, ways of hearing the holy Word, postures for experiencing this mercy, this great love.

We’ll read some of the Christian mystics of ancient-time and recent years, who drew close to the holy
and we’ll let our justice-making be inspired by their witness.

We’ll enter into the passion of Jesus and together we’ll keep vigil for Easter new life.

This season, I pray that our hearts will be broken open again with a love deeper than our own,

with a vision for God’s holy, mysterious ways,

with a promise of abundant mercy that is steadfast and true. Amen.