

ASH WEDNESDAY February 14, 2018
The Worst-Best Valentine's Day Gift Ever

It has probably already occurred to each of you that today is a rather interesting, even *unique*, day. That's because, for the very first time since 1945, Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day are actually sharing the same date. In other words, unless you're 73 years old, or older, you have never experienced this rare event before.

Just how rare is it? Well, this is only the 4th time in the past 100 years that it's happened; the other years being 1923, 1934, and the aforementioned 1945. *Prior* to 1923, you have to go all the way back to 1877 for a similar convergence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. However, the next one, interestingly enough, will take place in 2029.

But beyond its rarity, the convergence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day is noteworthy for another, far more practical, reason. And it's simply this: How do you go about observing or celebrating it? I mean, is it a day for somber reflection and repentance; that is, of contemplating and then confessing our sin and failures? Or is it a joyous celebration of love?

In other words, do you go ahead and do the whole flowers, card, and candy thing, and wait until *tomorrow* to start Lent? Or do you put off *Valentine's Day* for 24 hours or so? But that doesn't quite work either since many of the traditions surrounding Valentine's Day, especially those having to do with food and eating, for example, often involve things that many of us *give up* for Lent. Right?

So what are we to do? Get our ashes and then pop some chocolate-covered cherries in our mouth?

Something about that just doesn't seem quite right. I mean, I've heard about some terrible Valentine's Day gifts before, but pairing the holiday with Ash Wednesday would certainly seem to rank up there with the very worst of them.

And so that actually got me to thinking. What exactly *are* some of the worst Valentine's Day gifts on record? And how does having today also be Ash Wednesday then compare with them?

Therefore, here, in no particular order, are the results of my brief and unscientific online survey of the all-time worst Valentine's Day gifts:

- “He paid to get the brakes on my Jeep fixed,” says a woman named Sara. (Certainly sounds thoughtful.) “Then, when he found out it needed more parts, he gave *me* the rest of the bill.”
- Carey shared that *her* boyfriend gave her a \$100 gift card to a spa. (Again, very nice.) “Only it was filled out and dated *two years before we met.*”
- Amy says “My ex had promised that I would love my gift. ‘It’s something we can do together,’ he said. I knew it had to be a trip. (Now that may have been her problem. What do you think?) That night he presented me with an envelope over a romantic dinner. I opened it up expecting to see two plane tickets fall out. What fell out instead was a receipt for a one-year paid membership to a gym. There’s only one thing to say when you get a gift like that on Valentine’s Day,” she added. “Bye!”

- Speaking of receipts, one guy – who shall remain nameless – shared this, “Once I ordered my girlfriend flowers that didn’t arrive (or were stolen from the porch), so I gave her the delivery confirmation instead. It wasn’t as funny as I thought it would be,” he later admitted.
- A woman named Gianna noted, “Valentine’s Day was his birthday, so it was ‘his’ day. Ten years with him, I didn’t get anything.”
- Julie observed, “A waffle maker. Now a waffle maker on its own isn’t a terrible gift,” she admits, “except I don’t like waffles. We’d been together for five years and had eaten breakfast together hundreds of times and I’d never ordered waffles – ever. He never made me waffles, which was fine since I don’t actually like them, but the kicker? I found out a couple of weeks later that he’d won the waffle maker at a work fundraiser. Needless to say, we are no longer together.”
- “When I was a kid, my dad gave my mom a set of jumper cables for Valentine’s Day” (Ouch! Although, as it turns out, however, the story has a happy ending, believe it or not.) “He was in the doghouse for a couple of nights, but about a week later her battery died and dad was a hero again.”
- How about this one? An empty box of chocolates... As Lindsey explains it, “He told me that he bought it, and only *then* discovered that there was coconut in all of them (there never is, she asserts) and that he had to eat them to keep me from having an allergic reaction (I’m allergic to coconut). ‘So really,’ he said, ‘for Valentine’s day I actually saved your life.’” (Wow!)
- “I mentioned to my husband that we needed a new toilet seat.” (I bet you can guess where this one is going.) “Six weeks later, on Valentine’s Day he presented me with... (sure enough) a toilet seat. Ta-da!”

- Speaking of husbands, here's another. "We've been married for almost 10 years and have 4 children. Each year, he tells me that he's already given me my gift – four times over. Now I love my kids, but c'mon already!"
- Wait, wait, it gets worse! "I love Slim Jims," remarked another woman, "but receiving meat sticks as a gift on Valentine's Day was quite upsetting. To make it worse, he also bought me a Slim Jim car tool because I kept locking my keys in the car!"
- Speaking of insensitivity... or maybe just being clueless, another wife recalled, "He bought me a card on his way home from work that said, 'Happy Valentine's Day... Mother!' He didn't even read the card before giving it to me."
- Now in the interest of fairness, I do have one from a guy – but only one, I'm afraid. A fellow named Matt says, "The worst gift my ex ever gave me on Valentine's Day was... *nothing*. Normally, it wouldn't have mattered, but a week before Valentine's Day, my ex told me that she had exchanged gifts with every other man she had dated, and so we *had* to do the same. So I got her a gift. But when she didn't have one for me, she just said, 'Oh, I forgot.'"

But the worst – and I mean the absolute *worst* – idea for a Valentine's Day gift actually came from an advertisement that once appeared in a local newspaper. The ad read:

*If you had no idea what to get her for Valentine's Day...
 Imagine how overwhelming arranging her funeral would be...
 Give her the perfect gift, make pre-arrangements as a
 couple with the affordable funeral home.
 Choose from affordable services or affordable cremations.
 Compassion is our passion.
 By the way, did we tell you we were affordable.*

Come to think of it, that's kind of what Ash Wednesday falling on Valentine's Day sort of feels like. Doesn't it?

I mean, today we may find ourselves greeting each other with the words, "Happy Valentine's Day!" And, oh, by the way, then we go to church and here *this*, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." The two really don't seem to go together, do they? They don't seem to be very compatible.

So which is it? Shall we celebrate today as Valentine's Day? Or should we observe it as Ash Wednesday?

But there's a third option here, isn't there? How about this? Not one or the other, but what about *both*? In other words, can they coexist? Is it even possible that they can actually complement each other? The answer is "Yes!"

As Pastor Al Towberman has noted, "At first it might seem like a stretch." But consider this. "Both are days for lovers," he says.

Ash Wednesday, you see, is not only about reminding us of our human frailty and shortcomings. It's also, and even more importantly, about what God has done in *response* to our weakness and failures. And, specifically, what God has done in response out of unconditional and unfailing... *love*.

The apostle Paul put it this way in his letter to the Romans," For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good

person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

Now on Valentine’s Day it is customary, of course, for lovers to *pledge* their love for each other. And to give evidence of that love with some sort of gift or demonstration.

Therefore, consider this. Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent; that season of the church year when we are drawn into the powerful drama of God’s gracious response to human sinfulness and rebellion.

God could have just written us off, couldn’t he? Just said, “The heck with it, I’ve given them every chance, and each and every time they find some way to mess it up.”

In other words, God had every reason – and then some – to withdraw his love from us; to simply leave us to our own devices. But God doesn’t, does he? God doesn’t withdraw his love from us – ever. He doesn’t cut us loose and say, “The heck with it. The heck with *them*.”

No. Not at all. What does God do? God *keeps* on loving us, even though we don’t deserve it. God keeps on loving us, even though we can never earn it.

God is that lover who keeps on loving us, no matter what. And so Ash Wednesday is the perfect time to celebrate Valentine’s Day because it reminds us how God *pledges* that love for us by sending his Son into the world as a gift and as a demonstration of that love. A love so great, in fact, that Jesus was even willing to go to the cross for us, suffer for us, die for us. As Paul said, God *proves* his love for us, *pledges* his love for

us, in that, while we were still sinners – still sinners, mind you; still guilty as charged – while we were still sinners – *even now* – Christ died for us.

That's the powerful message of Lent; the season which begins today with Ash Wednesday. That's the powerful message that makes all the difference in our lives.

Yes, we have sinned. Yes, we have failed. Yes, we are underserving. But God proves his love for us in that – while all of that was and remains true to this day, nevertheless – Christ died for us.

So... is Ash Wednesday the worst Valentine's Day gift ever? I don't think so. In the end, it's quite likely the very *best* gift we could have ever received.

Amen.