Love Takes Many Forms

This year we have a bit of a strange coincidence in that Ash Wednesday happens to fall on Valentine's Day.

At first glance, the days seem to be very dissimilar; Valentine's Day often entailing chocolates, flowers, perhaps dinner with a significant other. (And lest any husband think you can skip Valentine's Day because it falls on Ash Wednesday, don't blame me if you end up on the couch for a week for making this most imprudent choice, though perhaps going out on Tuesday or Thursday may be a better option this year).

However looking a little more deeply, we know that love is much more than flowers, candlelit dinners or Valentine's cards and notes - its something that is fostered over time and grows. A couple learns the true meaning of love, and ideally we all do as well in our friendships, in our families, in the people we meet. Saint John Paul II spoke of the "personalistic norm," which can be summed up in that as humans are created in God's image in love, our response needs to be one of love.

Lent gives us the perfect opportunity to learn how to truly grow in our love for one another. And what better day than both Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day to contemplate it's deeper meaning.

So what makes for ideal love? The love reflecting of the Trinity; a perfect love between Father, Son and Spirit that flows outwardly to others. How do we make this a reality in our lives? A few things to consider:

Sacrifice. We refer to Mass as a sacrifice because it makes present again the sacrifice of Jesus for us on Good Friday. And we are reminded of God's love for us every time we look at the crucifix. We know very little about the real Saint Valentine which is why he is no longer on the official calendar of saints, but most accounts say he was martyred for holding to his faith in the third century, and did acts of love for others. Sacrifice though has to be a part of every loving relationship. Parents sacrifice time and money to raise their children. We sacrifice ego when we apologize and admit we were wrong. Children sacrifice time to help their parents and their family. People sacrifice of their time and talent and treasure to help their parish or a charity. The list goes on and on. When we gaze upon Jesus in the Eucharist or look at the cross, we should think "how far am I willing to go for those who need me?"

Receiving. It might sound obvious, but love also needs to be received. Ideally for us, that's the first thing that happens when we enter the world; we are placed into the arms of a loving mother. And when we are baptized, we celebrate how God's love is always with us. But it's worth asking how do we receive love. Sometimes when we weren't given the right understanding of love in our upbringing or went through difficult life experiences with family or the Church, we might not receive love as we should. Receiving love means being open to God's love and mercy and forgiving ourselves and reaching out to God when we fall. Can you accept that you are human? That you are

truly forgiven when you make mistakes? God forgives, but can you also forgive yourself? It means loving yourself. It means accepting that love is not a privilege but a right, and others who are in our lives should also be giving it to us. This means if a spouse isn't loving as they should, or a parent is cold or cruel, we have a right to speak up when a relationship isn't as it should be. Sadly some people just aren't aware or chose to be aware of how they treat others, sometimes within a family, or among friends or at a workplace. We shouldn't feel guilty when we speak up if someone isn't treating us as they should.

Forgiving. In every relationship, we let others down be it our spouses, our kids, or our parents. We are human. And that is why we ask for forgiveness from God. But forgiving others can be tough. But when we work towards forgiveness it can do so much to remind a person they are loved, and it also helps us to move forward and takes a burden off of our shoulders. Forgiveness though needs to be authentic; it takes time and sometimes a starting point is to acknowledge the reality of being wronged, then pray to God for help, then start praying for the other person. We can talk to others about a situation too, and hopefully get to a point where we can truly forgive others who trespass against us by reaching out to them as the last step. And remember the point with receiving love: forgiving also means forgiving ourselves. We are human and inevitably make mistakes. Don't forget the many good things you do too!

"Tough Love" Sometimes people confess judging others. We don't want to gossip and destroy a reputation, but we can judge actions. It's called "fraternal correction." If we will the good of the others, we will at times have to be spurred into action. What do you do when you see a Little League parent making a scene and yelling at a coach or umpire? What do you do when you are aware of a drinking problem in the family? What do you do when someone you know stops going to Mass? How do you handle "family secrets?" The human instinct with sin can be to run from it or to pretend that it's not there. But we have to confront these things out of love to truly help people.

Tolerating Differences. Tolerance is not just a bumper sticker slogan. We want to work towards helping people, but also be patient. We have to accept the fact that we are a diverse world. And if we love all people, we will make an effort to pray for all, and to not quickly condemn based on politics or other differences. You certainly don't have to change your mind or agree, but we do have to coexist together and perhaps starting from what we share in common and just trying to calm down when we encounter those with whom we have strong differences can improve our relationships with each others. And also, consider arguing - a good thing - rather than shouting - a bad thing. Arguing helps us to understand the other person, the issue we are arguing about more deeply, and also helps them to understand us better. Loving others and trying to help them see the truths of our faith takes time and patience.

Catechesis. Jesus sends us as disciples into the world. But how catechized are we? What I mean by this is do we know our faith? Can we articulate it? We show our love for God by learning all He has to teach us; this is why we study the Bible and also learn our faith as we have understood it through the assistance of the Church which is there to

shepherd us. Its important to not just memorize prayers, but to know the meaning behind those prayers, and why we believe what we do. But it also helps us to evangelize the world, and this is more important than ever in a world which has so much relativism in it, meaning one belief is as good as another which is what a lot of people adhere to as a mindset. Getting to heaven is a pretty big deal - and it should be our primary focus in life, to become a saint. Salvation of souls is something we all partake in, and knowing and articulating our faith to others is a big component of love. This component of love is something we are emphasizing with the whole Synod process and small groups kicking off in the season of Lent; helping people learn and share the faith so they can share it with the world. Consider stopping by the table this weekend to learn more about these small groups and signing up either there or in the parish office or online.

Some might think of love in a special way on Valentine's Day, and it's a wonderful day to celebrate love (just don't eat meat on this particular Valentine's Day). But love for the Christian is a way of life; and just as every couple quickly realizes there's a lot more to a relationship than dating, but that it's about making one another better through sacrifice, forgiveness and challenging each other, the same is true for us all. God wants us to grow in our understanding of Him and gives us a commandment - love one another as I have loved you. Let's think about that not just on February 14th, but every day of the year.

Have a blessed week and Lenten Season,

Fr. Paul