

Everywhere we go this month, there are hearts. In the stores, in our workplaces, on our front doors. Big, red hearts. Tiny, pink hearts. Chocolate hearts. Paper hearts. Hearts for sweethearts, parents fathers, siblings, neighbors. Hearts for teachers, classmates, children, friends. Sticky, sugary, silly, sour, sweet hearts.

Even in church we can't escape hearts this February. In each of the lessons appointed for this Ash Wednesday, there are hearts. The prophet Joel, in today's first lesson, calls the people of Israel to return to the Lord with all their hearts, to rend their hearts and not their clothing as they keep a fast. The Psalmist prays that God create in us a "clean heart, a right spirit." Paul, in II Corinthians, reminds us that we are in need of reconciliation with God in our hearts. Jesus warns the crowds who have gathered on the mountain to hear him: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Lent is a time of the heart; it's a time set aside in the church year to get our hearts in order, to get our hearts cleaned out, to get our hearts right with God. It's a time in the church when we focus on what's inside us. But to do this, the church, over 2,000 years, has developed some outer disciplines. Do you know what they are? There are three. Traditionally, in the season of Lent, followers of Jesus commit to pray, to fast, and to give alms.

In today's gospel reading, from the sixth chapter of Matthew, Jesus speaks to his listeners about these three spiritual disciplines: praying, fasting, and almsgiving. Knowing that any of these disciplines can become empty rituals, Jesus admonishes his hearers to practice them without fanfare, without regard for the attention of the world. In other words, he says to his followers: "Pray, and fast, and give alms, but only if your heart is in it. Don't worry about whether or not people notice you praying—or fasting—or giving charity for those in need. Pray and fast and give alms not because someone told you to or because you want others to notice you or because you think it will get God's attention. Instead, pray and fast and give alms from your heart."

During these forty days of Lent, you are invited to pray—or to fast—or to give alms—as God leads you, as Jesus calls you. You may, of course, include activities at King of Kings in your Lenten discipline. Of course we gather for worship, on-line and in person—on Saturdays and Sundays, and on Wednesday evenings at 7:15 pm, with Holy Communion if you desire it. This year there will be private, silent space during worship in which you may ask: What is holding me back from a deeper relationship with God? What habits is God calling me to release? Or you can check out BING—Bible INtergenerational Gathering on Sundays—or adult study on Wednesdays at 6:30 pm and Thursdays at 10:00 am. Or you may join in fellowship—with refreshments after worship on Sundays or Soup Supper on Wednesdays at 6:00 pm. In any of these ways, you might find renewal for your heart.

In this Lenten season, whenever you see big red hearts or tiny pink hearts in your office or on your front door, I invite you to respond to God's invitation to turn to God, to return to God, with all your heart, no matter what disciplines you choose on the outside. As you initiate or continue disciplines of prayer or fasting or almsgiving, of worship or education, may your heart be in whatever commitments you make. Whether you pray or fast or give or worship or learn, be assured that God's heart is "gracious and merciful," as the prophet Joel tells us, "slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." As you lift up your heart in these forty days, as you hear the Word of God and taste the bread and wine, as you pray or fast or give alms, remember this: God's heart overflows with love for you! AMEN