In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The concurrence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day is just too lovely to miss. I cannot recall this happening before during my ministry -- that Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day should fall on the same day. But it has happened today, and I bet clergy across the land are preaching about these two great subjects: love and the cross. On Valentine’s Day, we are happy to speak of love. On Ash Wednesday, we solemnly receive the ashes in the shape of the cross. Thereby we are put in mind of Jesus and his wondrous love -- a love for which Jesus would spare nothing, not even his own life. So, I bet lots of clergy are preaching about love and the cross. Let me try my hand at it too.

C.S. Lewis once remarked that if you ask many good people in the modern world what they thought was the chief virtue, most would answer, Unselfishness. But Lewis says that the great Christians of old would give a different answer. The passage goes this way:

If you asked twenty good men today what they thought the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness. But if you had asked almost any of the great Christians of old, he would have replied, Love. You see what has happened? A negative term has been substituted for a positive, and this is of more than philological importance. The negative idea of Unselfishness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them ourselves, as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point. I do not think this is the Christian virtue of Love.¹

I am standing here at one of our church’s alms boxes. We have two more like it near the narthex. There is a slot in the top and people drop in money. From time to time, Parish Secretary Sean Curnyn collects the money and we use it for the poor. Judging by today’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus would prefer that we not make a big show of putting money in the alms box. We are not to blow a trumpet and wave, as if to say, “Look at me as I put money in the alms box.”

Why? Well, because our reward then would be too meager. Two words stand out in our Lord’s saying -- the words, “received” and “their."² Listen for these two words. Jesus says this:

²So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. (Matthew 6:2, NRSV)

They received “their” reward -- not the Lord’s reward. They received the reward they were aiming at. They were aiming to be noticed, and they were! But that is a small matter compared to the reward God had wanted for them. Why, they could have been noticed and praised by the angels and the archangels. The prophets and the apostles and he who is Lord of all, even Jesus Christ, could have looked on them with approval. The heavenly host could have smiled at the one giving alms—if that one had done it, not for the sake of fame, but simply out of love -- love even for the poor stranger. They have received “their” reward, but it is awfully shallow compared to what they could have received.

And they have “received” it. Past tense. They received their reward. It lasted but a moment. They sounded their trumpet, they waved their arms, and people noticed them. For a moment or two. But again, that is a small matter compared to eternity. It is a small matter compared to heaven. If they had quietly given their alms, forsaking the praise of the crowds and simply giving their money out of love for their neighbors, then they might not have gotten any reward here and now in this world, but they could trust the matter over to God, who is well able to reward them in heaven and in eternity. It was a poor exchange these almsgivers made for themselves. They traded eternity and the praise of God and the angels for the immediate praise of the onlookers. They traded heaven for a pot of porridge.

What ailed them is that they were not practicing love. Love! That is our subject for this twin day of Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday.

This evening’s Bible Lessons speak of fasting. We read of fasting in both our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 58 and from the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. In both cases, our Lord is preaching heart religion. It is not enough that we should be outwardly respectable. That is good, but we will be even better when we make our hearts even more pure than they already are.

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² A point made by Matthew Henry in his commentary on this passage.
Let we read again from our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 58. The Lord begins by saying that he is not content with the kind of fasting that leaves us mean. It is no good to fast with the stomach if with the fist we are mean to our neighbors. The Lord says this:

4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high...

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn... (Isaiah 58:6-8, RSV)

Why do you suppose the Lord is so earnest about this matter of love? Why does the Lord so obviously prefer compassion on the suffering folks of this world to the kind of fasting and almsgiving that leaves the heart cold and mean? You know the answer, I am sure: Our God is earnest about this matter of love because our God is love. That is the chief and fundamental lesson of the Bible. St. John expresses the idea with beautiful words:

He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. (1 John 4:8, KJV, my emphasis)

Now, my friends, there are two sides to this for us human beings. On the one hand, our God’s love concerns us. On the other hand, it concerns our neighbors.

So, first, concerning ourselves, God’s love burns with hope for us. He does not want us to perish. He does not want us to whittle away our hours and days and years blowing our trumpets and waving our arms and trying to accumulate as much of this world’s fame as we can. He built us for something better than that: he built us to be people of love. He created us to practice love. That is what Christians have always done. That is how the Church has always grown. “See how they love one another!” The church caught the eye of the world because the church practiced love. The early Christians took in abandoned infants. They created the institutions of hospitals and orphanages.
They were true to one another. They took the vows of marriage seriously. They practiced almsgiving – not to win praise, but simply to lend a hand to helping the poor. They lived the kind of life our Maker intends for each of us. They were people of love. Our God of love wants that for us! He does not want us to squander our years in things that do not matter. He wants us to pursue and practice love even more than we have in the past.

So, that is about us. Our loving God does not want us to perish or to waste our years. He wants us to turn to something noble: he wants us to turn to a life of love.

But there is another side to God’s love. Not only does our God love us, one by one, and want us to flourish, but also he wants our neighbors to flourish. And for this, he asks our help. He does not want us to wrangle with our neighbors and strike with wicked fist, because that is bad for us, and it is awful for our neighbors. Our God loves those neighbors and wants us to help him take care of them.

That is why Jesus was born on this earth. Jesus is the only begotten Son of God. He is the very Second Person of the Holy Trinity. He became incarnate and was born of the virgin Mary that he might pursue and practice love for all of humanity—all the way to the Cross. If loving meant suffering along the way, he was willing to suffer to the very end, even to his final breath. Love does sometimes mean suffering, and so it is fitting that on this day, we bear the sign of the cross in the mark of the ashes. On this Valentine’s Day, it is right for us that we should also bear the sign of the cross on our foreheads. If love means suffering, let it come. There is heaven ahead and life in Christ in the meanwhile.

And so, as I step away from this homemade pulpit, from this alms box, I leave you with these Valentine greetings from Jesus himself: I love you! Now join me in my love. Amen.