

I can still remember in elementary school, making this overly elaborate Valentine's Day card box, but, of course, it wasn't just one box, you see. It was several cardboard shapes put together all wrapped in red aluminum foil or pink construction paper, altogether making this robot-like receptacle for all the Valentines I was obviously going to get from my classmates. All of this was not just because I could do it; it was, instead, about impressing the girls in the class and, just as importantly, making the other boys look bad. All that competition aside, Valentine's Day was, actually, just one of those sweet, nice days for us in our own little rural elementary school, but, soon enough, I had to realize Valentine's Day is not as sweet and nice for everyone.

Of course, tonight, the church isn't helping matters, as we, in a united cooperative effort, are ruining date night plans for couples across the land, and for that, we apologize. However, we also recognize that no matter how crafty the elementary school students or the mass creativity with the professional Hallmark card-writers, Valentine's Day does not work for everyone; and it's not just with relationship status, but also for those for whom this will be the first Valentine's Day without their loved one. And this day only further reminds them of that loss. Or for those who are going

through a heart-wrenching break-up or divorce, and those who live through abusive relationships with people who are supposed to love them the most, and they struggle so desperately to find a way out for their own personal safety. Valentine's Day does not work for everyone.

Tonight, the church in a hopeful, united cooperative effort, is not just about marking up foreheads with ashes, but a renewed commitment to letting all the world know this God is for absolutely everyone, no questions-asked, no fine-print if's/and's/or but's whatsoever. Just as you are, in whatever circumstances you are in, with whatever baggage you come along with, this God loves you more than you can ever imagine.

Because the Gospel reminds all of us tonight, that this is the God who not only knows us on the bare surface that we openly share with others, but the God who goes with us into a room that we shut so tightly the door behind to escape the rest of the world. The God who goes with us into our secrets, that sometimes, quite honestly, we wish God not go with us at all, but still comes anyway: not to shame us, not to make us feel guilty, but with an embrace that will carry us ever-so-tightly for a lifetime and beyond.

This is the God who offers this night to the whole world as a reminder that we may very well return to our mortal dust, but this God refuses to allow

us to stay behind death's door. After all, tonight isn't so much about a united cooperative church effort, but God going to work for those in a happy marriage of over sixty-plus years, and the one never married. Tonight is for the child who made the cutest box of all for class today, and for the one whose family didn't have the means to put anything together at all. Tonight is for the die-hard Lenten-observer who will give up any slight trace of sugar in any food on any restaurant menu or grocery store shelf, and for the one who will not change a thing these next forty days. Tonight is for the one with the most-blotched up cross smeared on their head, and for the one who isn't quite ready to wear that mortality-reminder just yet.

However, this Gospel is not just for one night alone. This is an everyday occurrence: that nothing, absolutely nothing, is beyond this most life-altering compassionate reach of God. This is the God who will go with us not only into the depths of our inner-most secrets, but even to the very dust of the earth with us. We come before this God tearing away even the prettiest of bare surface coverings, opening up our lives with no secrets hidden, since they're already known by God anyway, no sin pushed off to the side, all of it brought before this God to restore us, to not allow any of it to define us, that it can somehow seal our fate; not just for tonight, though, but

through the entirety of this life and beyond. Because no matter how deep the dust not only of our own mortality, but no matter how deep and dirty our sin and embarrassing circumstances may feel like they overwhelm any beauty we may have had, God gets to wipe that slate clean tonight and every day. Every day God gets to bring the Gospel to life in all of us, to remind us in no uncertain terms, you are a child of God, you are mine forever. I will never let you go, not even in the dust of the earth.

There's obviously no holiday card or box that can contain that Gospel truth. Just our very life itself. Just us as we are, with plenty of restoration and hope to experience still, to say the least, but knowing the dust does not get to cover our eyes from seeing the beauty of God in the countless many surrounding us, in the very Creation, and even in the utter simplicity of bread and wine, the very gifts of God for all children of God no questions asked, no if's/and's/or but's whatsoever. Just Jesus unleashing his life-saving love yet again for us all, for the whole world. And for that, we most certainly give thanks to God indeed! Amen.