

Ashes to Ashes, Be My Valentine  
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The Bible is chock-full of irony. You know that moment when the same brothers who sold Joseph into slavery are standing before him begging for food, unaware it is their brother? It's a great moment, especially when Joseph forgives his brothers. The irony of the moment intensifies the message.

The same is true of Jesus' crucifixion. The perfectly innocent Son of God is punished for the sins of the entire world. The irony is thick, and so is the significance. In many ways, irony is God's tool to reveal truths that may otherwise remain hidden.

When we encounter ironies in the world around us, we can explore them for deeper meaning. We have a day of irony coming up in the calendar. It's February 14, Valentine's Day. Now a holiday of love and romance is ripe for irony all by itself, but when it falls on Ash Wednesday, the irony is unmistakable. There's something about candy hearts and the imposition of ashes that doesn't really jive. "Remember that you are dust and pick up roses on the way home." Maybe there's something deeper in the midst of the irony that can lend it greater significance.

According to Britannica, the legend of St. Valentine dates back to the 3rd century C.E. and the bold witness of an early Christian leader. In the face of persecution, St. Valentine blessed others and even faced martyrdom rather than denouncing the faith. The love of St. Valentine was for God and his fellow believers. While February 14 is the traditional date of the martyrdom of St. Valentine, it only became the celebration of love and romance that we know today after a poem by Chaucer around 1375 associated the date with finding a mate.

Learning the back story of St. Valentine makes our modern Valentine's Day holiday seem ironic unto itself! What does the obligatory expression of affection have to do with a 3rd-century Christian martyr? Very little. However, we should not overlook the love of St. Valentine for God and others and his willingness to die rather than to give it up.

The season of Lent dates back to the 4th century. The observance of Ash Wednesday developed over the centuries following. Lent is a season of penitence and spiritual self-reflection. It often includes the discipline of fasting and confession. Ash Wednesday kicks off the season with the application of ashes, a powerful symbol of mourning, mortality, and penitence taken from the scriptures (see Matt. 11:21, Job. 42:6, Est. 4:1, Dan. 9:3). The ashes on our foreheads help us to remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return (Genesis 3:19b).

Reminders of our mortality are not pleasant, but they help us appreciate God's gift of life and the people He has given to us. Today is a gift. While we can look forward to eternal life through Jesus, we don't know how long we have on this side of eternity. Make the most of this day, especially for the sake of those you love and who love you. St. Valentine learned from Jesus that true love is sacrificial. Live sacrificially for those you love. Show them your love through your actions. Say the words, "I love you." Look them in the eye, especially on Valentine's Day as the ashes adorn your foreheads.