

# Leaning into Our Belovedness:

## *A Reflection for Lent*

By Gretchen Crowder



I really feel for kids everywhere this year. I remember what a big deal Valentine's Day was when I was a child — it always meant coming home with a big pile of candy and an even bigger smile on my face. I also remember what Lent felt like as a kid, especially when it began the same week as Valentine's Day: It meant having my smile fade as I stared at that pile of candy and wondered if I had the fortitude to give it all up for Jesus.

This year, Valentine's Day, a day of love and joy and chocolate, coincides with Ash Wednesday, a day of dust and sacrifice and a stark reminder of our mortality.

At first glance, these two days could not be more different. In fact, I spent weeks pondering this dichotomy as I prepared what I would write about Lent 2024. But suddenly it hit me: Maybe they are not as different as I think they are. After all, they are both expressions of love.

For the past few years, I have been writing and speaking nonstop about a message that God planted in my heart years ago and fortified during my journey through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: God loves me as I am, no matter what. Even more, God loves every human being as they are, no matter what. This magnanimous love is the reason God sent Jesus to us in the first place. This magnanimous love is the reason Jesus left home and walked throughout Jerusalem teaching, healing, and welcoming all to his table. This magnanimous love is also the reason that when soldiers came to arrest him in the Garden, he went, and when more soldiers nailed him to the cross, he stretched out his hands and offered his life for us.

This magnanimous love God has for each of us is the foundation of everything.

I believe wholeheartedly that a Lent that begins with Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day on the same day — an occurrence that will only happen three times this century — gives us an opportunity to do something a little different. Of course, if you want to give up something that is getting in the way of your relationship with God, please do so. It is a valuable and time-honored way of preparing your heart for Easter. But I would also like to invite you to consider that when we know we are magnanimously loved by God, the sacrifice follows naturally.



What if this year we prepared our hearts for Easter by spending forty days leaning into and internalizing our belovedness?

What if this year we prepared our hearts for Easter by recognizing and celebrating that the greatest love of our lives is the one who walked the road to Calvary, stretched out his arms on the cross, and offered up his life for every one of us?

This may be a way that our journey through Lent can change us as it never has before.

*So how do we do this?*

## First, we can ask for help through prayer.

St. Ignatius taught that God wants us to be honest in our prayer. God wants us to ask — right up front, right at the beginning of our prayer — for what we *want*. He didn't really want us to get hung up on whether or not God would give us exactly *what* we want exactly *how* we wanted it. That kind of thinking prevents us from being honest about what we *truly* desire. Instead, he just said “ask for it.”

So, I try to practice this in my own prayer. Ignatius called it “asking for a grace.”

This Lent, I want to ask Jesus for the grace to understand and internalize the magnanimous love he has for me personally. So here are a couple prayers that might help me do just that:

Dear Jesus,  
Did you really think of me  
while you were gathering your apostles  
or healing the sick or calming the waters?

Did you really think of me  
while you were being arrested  
or while dying on the cross?

Did you really think of me  
and even more *love* me  
when you had so many  
more *important* things to do?

Somewhere deep inside  
I know You love me, as I am, no matter what  
and I am working on  
accepting and leaning into it.

Grant me the faith I need  
so that I may see you  
as someone who came for all of us  
and each of us in turn,  
as someone who loved all of us  
and each of us in turn.

Amen

~ Gretchen Crowder

Oh, Lord my God,  
You have called me from the sleep of nothingness  
merely because in your tremendous love  
you want to make good and beautiful beings.  
You have called me by my name in my mother's womb.  
You have given me breath and light and movement  
and walked with me every moment of my existence.

I am amazed,  
Lord God of the universe,  
that you attend to me and, more,  
*cherish* me.

Create in me the faithfulness that moves you,  
and I will trust you and yearn for you all my days.

Amen

~ Fr. Joseph Tetlow, SJ

*God's love shines down upon me  
like the light rays from the sun, or  
God's love is poured forth lavishly  
like a fountain spilling forth its waters  
into an unending stream.*

~ *The Spiritual Exercises, 237*

Another form of prayer St. Ignatius taught was the Examen. The Examen is a daily reflection on God's presence in our lives. In fact, Ignatius so valued the Examen that he instructed the early Jesuits that even if they had no time for any other prayer, they should pray the Examen twice daily – at midday and in the evening.



How can we use the Examen this Lent to help us accept  
and internalize our belovedness?

## An Examen on the Seven Last Words



Lord, when you say: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.*

Help me hear: *I forgive you, even before you are ready, even before you have forgiven yourself. Let my forgiveness free you.*

Allow me to see those moments when I most needed your forgiveness today, and may these words of yours on the cross be a reminder that your love for me knows no bounds.

Lord, when you say: *Today you will be with me in Paradise.*

Help me hear: *My love for you extends beyond the boundaries of this world. Take my hand.*

Allow me to see those moments when you were leading me toward something better today, and may these words of yours on the cross be a reminder that your love for me knows no bounds.

Lord, when you say: *Woman, this is your son ... This is your mother.*

Help me hear: *I have never and will never leave you to face your perils alone, not in this world or the next. Trust in those I have chosen to surround you with.*

Allow me to see those moments when you were inviting me to companionship today, and may these words of yours on the cross be a reminder that your love for me knows no bounds.

Lord, when you say: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

Help me hear: *I know what it feels like to be afraid. I know what it feels like to face persecution for doing what you believe is right. I also know that these feelings are never the end of the story. Trust that I walk with you now and always.*

Allow me to recognize those moments when I was afraid to follow you today, and may these words of yours on the cross be a reminder that your love for me knows no bounds.

Lord, when you say: *I thirst.*

Help me hear: *I know what real thirst feels like, as well as real hunger and real, unbelievable pain. I remember my suffering as well as I remember yours. Have faith that I understand and tangibly know every part of you, body and soul.*

Allow me to see you feeling with me during my most painful moments today, and may these words of yours on the cross be a reminder that your love for me knows no bounds.

Lord, when you say: *It is finished.*

Help me hear: *I knew that I could not do it alone. When my human body had done all it could, the rest was up to the Divine. When your human efforts are expended, trust in me to do the rest.*

Allow me to see those moments when you helped me go beyond what I thought was possible today, and may these words of yours on the cross be a reminder that your love for me knows no bounds.

Lord, when you say: *Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*

Help me hear: *I sacrificed all of me for you because I loved you even then, no matter what. Let my love lead you to love others well.*

Allow me to see those moments when I loved others well and when I did not love others well today, and may these words of yours on the cross be a reminder that your love for me knows no bounds.

Lord, when I hear you say, somewhere deep inside of me,

*“I love you, as you are, no matter what,”  
help me really hear it, believe it, and know it  
to the core of who I am.*

*I think it just may be what I need today  
to continue to move ever closer to the person  
you are calling me to be.*

*How will you pray?*



## We can do some spiritual reading.

Many theologians and spiritual writers have written on the magnanimous love God has for each of us. This Lent, I plan to spend some time revisiting their wisdom.

Like that of Fr. Greg Boyle, SJ, who wrote in *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*:  
“But the work one does seeks to align our lives with God’s longing for us — that we be happy, joyful, and liberated from all that prevents us from seeing ourselves as God does.”

Or Fr. James Martin, SJ, who wrote in *Becoming Who You Are: Insights on the True Self from Thomas Merton and Other Saints*:

“God desires for us to be the persons we were created to be: to be simply and purely ourselves, and in this state, to love God and to let ourselves be loved by God. It is a double journey, really: finding God means allowing ourselves to be found by God. And finding our true selves means allowing God to find and reveal our true selves to us.”

Or St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who wrote in *Story of a Soul*:

“Jesus, it seems to me you could not have overwhelmed a soul with more love than you have poured out on mine.”

*What will you read?*

## We can have conversations.

Last April, I started a podcast called *Loved As You Are: An Ignatian Podcast*. I interview people and ask them about who God is to them, how they’ve come to understand their belovedness, and what challenges they’ve encountered. Their stories continue to inform my own. I have found that engaging with the stories of others has made my own story more complete over time.

There are many ways to engage in conversations, such as in book clubs or retreats, or simply allowing yourself to be open to unexpected conversations about faith anytime they happen to occur. What would it look like if this Lent we tried starting each conversation from a place of security in God’s love — both for others, and for ourselves?

*What conversations will you have?*

## Finally, we can pay attention to how we love others.

In my life, recognizing how I love my sons has been a key way that I have worked on internalizing my own belovedness. Despite all the times they drive me crazy, I really do love them as they are, no matter what. I have since the moment they were born, and that love increases as I get to know each of them as their unique selves. Recognizing the love I have for my sons and reflecting on its immensity has shown me that it is possible, even probable, that if I as a human being can feel that kind of love for them, God can feel that kind of love for me — ten, a hundred, a million fold.

So, what do you think? Will you join me?

Will you do the work to prepare your heart for Easter by spending 40 days leaning into and internalizing your belovedness?

It just might change everything.

I invite you to pull this article out of the magazine to use throughout Lent. And join me Sundays at [www.JesuitsCentralSouthern.org](http://www.JesuitsCentralSouthern.org) for weekly reflections on being loved as we are, no matter what.

*How will you love others well?*



**Gretchen Crowder** is a campus minister and educator at Jesuit Dallas as well as a writer, retreat director and podcaster. You can find her at [gretchencrowder.com](http://gretchencrowder.com) and on *Loved As You Are: An Ignatian Podcast*, available anywhere you get your podcasts.