



Unspeakable Love
Song of Songs 2:8-17
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I have found as a preacher that many who come to church have a certain expectation for how a preacher will preach – they have an expectation for how long the sermon will last, the language the preacher will use to make their point, the topics the preacher will or will not talk about, whether the preacher should or shouldn't use humor, or current events, or politics ... people have expectations for what they want to hear, what makes them proud of their faithfulness, what challenges them to live into better faithfulness, and what they think is just the preacher snooping in their business.

Of all the sermon topics I find people want to avoid, of all the ones that people will intentionally stay home to prevent hearing, are sermons that deal with intimacy and stewardship (sex and money). For example, it's always odd to me that so many people take vacations on consecration Sunday, when pledges to support the church are invited. I guess I should be happy that so many in the church are so well connected that vacations are scheduled in harmony with one another. (That's just an example of how close we are as a community, right?) Never mind that giving – how we deal with our finances and ownership – is one of the topics Jesus addresses most, and a regular concern for the community of faithful who profess belief in God throughout the Biblical text, people just don't want to hear about it. Some say that's not preaching, that's meddling. Well, rest easy, we're not talking about money today.

I've also heard people say pastors should not talk about sexuality from the pulpit. I've had more than one colleague who had a letter written to the Bishop because of their use of sexual language in the pulpit, or their preaching on human sexuality. Unlike Jesus' teaching and the Biblical call for right stewardship regarding money and giving, there are far fewer Biblical texts that addresses human sexuality. In the church we tend to claim sexuality as taboo, as being exclusively a private matter, and as having no place in the public sphere. Many are uncomfortable with public displays of affection. Perhaps because it isn't as much a focus of the Biblical text as topics like giving or even welcoming the immigrant, it is right for sexuality to be less often addressed in Sunday sermons. But, nevertheless, as uncomfortable as it may make you to hear and discuss sexuality, that is our focus today. I ask you just let me get through the sermon before you start writing your letter to the Bishop.

I wonder if we as people of faith are uncomfortable with the language of sexuality, especially used from the pulpit, because we just aren't well read in the Bible. Have you ever read Song of Songs before? It's just 8 short chapters of love poetry – you could easily finish in one sitting. But honestly, some of this Biblical text could put to shame 50 Shades. It is written as a poem that goes back and forth between a man and a woman, expressing their intimate and erotic love for one another. We'll get to chapter 2 in a minute, but let's read some of Song of Songs. Chapter 7 begins with the man writing of the woman:

“How graceful are your feet in sandals, O queenly maiden!
Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand.

Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine.
Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies.
Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.
Your neck is like an ivory tower.
Your eyes are pools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim.
Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus.
Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses.”

It seems bed-talk has changed a lot over the years. For those wondering, I don't recommend the “belly is a heap of wheat” line; I have a suspicion that wouldn't work as well today.

But seriously, go home and read Song of Songs – read it in full. This is the language of our Biblical text, yet there are some parts that get pretty graphic. With this kind of intimate language being part of our foundational Biblical texts, why are we so timid to speak this language? Why do we feel embarrassed to read the text – perhaps aloud or to ourselves?

My suspicion is that we have shied away from such intimate language because the language of sexuality has been obscured, mistreated, and perverted by our culture. In our society, we treat sexuality as a commodity. Even though Song of Songs makes it clear that such mutual attraction, such strong emotion, and such fulfillment through sexuality is not peripheral to God's will, the “commercialization [of sexuality in the modern era] devalues and subordinates human sexuality for the sake of economic gain, instead of honoring and respecting God's intended gift and joy.”ⁱ

We're going to consider in more detail today's reading in Chapter 2 to help us understand, how is Song of Songs a text of faith? How does it teach us of our historic faith, and how does it call us to faithfulness today?

Traditionally, scholars believe this text to have been a collection of poetry that was written by King Solomon. Perhaps you've heard this book called Song of Solomon before – the name is due to the supposed attribution to the king. It truly is a collection of erotic poetry that professes the deep love between a specific man and a specific woman. There is not a single occurrence in the 8 chapters where the name of God is mentioned. Unlike the other books of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Old Testament, this is not a narrative story of the people Israel; it is not an account of a prophet; it is not a book of rules, laws, or other Godly requirements. It is also unlike anything in the New Testament – it is not a narrative of Jesus, names no teachings by Christ, and it is not a letter from a leader of the faith offering instruction, affirmation, or other Biblical guidance to a local church community. It is, in truest form, a collection of love poetry.

Perhaps because it is as graphic as it is, in the church (scholars, leaders, clergy, theologians, and others), we have sought to find ways to explain away the excessive language of the text. There are many who claim the book is little more than an allegorical account of God's love for Israel. Seen in this way, appropriately in the context of the history of Israel during King Solomon's time, one could claim God to be the man and the people Israel the woman, and we could say this is just a poetic expression of how deep God loves the chosen people of Israel.

Others claim it is allegorical, but instead of being about God's love for Israel, they claim it relates to Christ's love for the faithful. Many Christians try to read a Christocentric understanding of this Hebrew Bible text, which was written before Christ was born. When the text claims "the winter is past" and "the rains are gone," it *could* be a metaphor for claiming Christ's salvific work that offers new life to all amidst the darkness of sin.

Yet, I wonder if we are too quick to write off such explicit text because it makes it easier for us to read. Teresa of Avila, a Catholic saint and theologian of the 16th century says with the Song, perhaps like other texts, we like to avoid them because they make us uncomfortable, or we're afraid the effect it will have on us. She goes on to say, and I quote, "It will seem to you that there are some words in the Song of Songs that could have been said in another style. In light of our dullness such an opinion doesn't surprise me. I have heard some persons say that they avoid listening to them. Oh, God, help me, how great is our misery! Just as poisonous creatures turn everything they eat into poison, so do we."ⁱⁱ ... Perhaps Teresa of Avila is right. Perhaps we are more comfortable making the extraordinary mundane.

As we read the text today, what if we didn't try to write the words of poetry off as metaphorical or allegorical. What if, instead of trying to tame the language, we read it for the deep and passionate language it is? What if we read the language as being a statement of love between two persons, and learned from it, not how much God loves us, or how Christ, in love, gave himself for us – but instead, read it to be about the power of love between two persons. Perhaps in the midst of an era when hatred toward the other is the norm, "we need to hear voices that speak boldly of true love. We need to be reminded of what love can be."ⁱⁱⁱ

In our reading today, the woman is speaking of the man. She begins, "The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills." We are reminded that love can be reckless and quick, and can lead us to go to great lengths to be with those for whom we care. And yet, as we keep reading, it also reminds us that once we are present with those we love, it is as if time slows down. We invest in, and we mark our presence with those we love. "Although [the lover] has bounded across mountains and hills with incredible energy and speed, he knows how to slow down, how to speak softly and lovingly, how to coax his beloved from her hidden places."^{iv}

Beginning in verse 9, we read, "Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice." He has come to the place where she has secluded herself, but instead of going in to her, he urges her to come out. Continuing in verse 10, he says, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

The man is standing outside the woman's place, urging her to come out. "She will not be able to know the world as it is – blooming and blossoming – if she remains inside the walls of her house. ... To step outside is to join the earth as it turns and changes and comes to life again."^v The Song reminds us, this

is love – love encourages and urges us to join in something greater than ourselves. Love is not meant to be a secluding emotion, it is a gift to celebrate our engagement with another.

His urging her to come out after the winter is past, and after the rain is gone, is indicative that even those most deeply in love can experience the hardships of life. But amidst the hardships, we aren't designed to survive alone. This imagery of love certainly harkens back to the story of creation, in which God acknowledges that we aren't meant to live alone. "To be in love is to live beyond the boundaries of the self and to enter a realm of sheer delight, in which the human and the divine can merge."^{vi} The creator and the created are built in the same image, one in which we are most true to our creation when living amidst one another, sharing in community, and partaking in the giving of life to others.

In verse 16, we keep reading, "My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies." ... This tells us something of love, but admittedly, it leaves more to one's imagination.

Our passage ends with the same kind of imagery it begins. Verse 17 says, "Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft mountains." Her love for the man doesn't necessitate his staying; indeed, she invites him to continue on his journey, reminding us that deep love between does not stop with a simple openness to one another. Deep love invites a love for others, that we should share such love with the world as throughout life's journeys.

Though, try as we might, we may never fully know the depth of the poet's heart. The beauty of poetry is that each who hears it will create in their mind their own visual of the text. It need not be over explained, or written off as allegory. To over justify poetry is to take away its life. So, instead of further explicating on the Song of Songs, I think a simple overarching observation is sufficient: the power of love is deep, its fierce, and its freeing. If ever you see something shallow, or weak, or constricting, it's probably not love. We should be cautious to ensure we do not mistake masked hatred for love, affection for abuse, or emotion for personal gain. But instead, hear the true love of our faith, as it stands on its own. To close, let me offer these words, again from the poetry of the Song, coming in chapter 8,

"Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. It flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned."

ⁱ Charles E. Raynal. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Harvey Cox and Stephanie Paulsell. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Lamentations and Song of Songs*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alphonetta Wines. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved August 29, 2018.

^{iv} Cox and Paulsell.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Julia M. O'Brien. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.