

“A song of love”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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James 1:17-27 and Song of Solomon 2:8-13

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I'm curious: Who's familiar with the Song of Solomon? Who's read it? If you're online, tell us in the comments. Who's heard it preached? Now, lower your hand if it was at a wedding. Don't feel bad; this is the only time the Song of Solomon appears in the Revised Common Lectionary. Three years of Scripture, and this is the only time. Jewish rabbis used to consider it so provocative that they restricted its study to only the most advanced students. For much of Christian history, scholars and pastors have avoided even talking about it.

It was easy to ignore a few pages—eight short chapters—in Hebrew. It's not history or theology, or a psalm praising God. There are no prophets or nations, no saviors or disciples. It's just a wedding song between two people in love. One might think it got put into the Bible by mistake, like some young person panicked when they heard their parents' footsteps and stuffed their secret love letter between the pages of their religious homework, and it just got left there—and here we are, centuries later, reading a record of ancient Hebrew puberty.

Except, religious leaders spent centuries prayerfully deciding what should and shouldn't be included in the Bible; a lot of books got left out; this one was chosen. They said this is the word of God. This little wedding song is a place where God is to be seen, heard, tasted, and felt.

Yet, when we open it, we find this: “May he smother me with kisses.” The bride says to the groom, “Your love is more fragrant than wine... bring me into your chamber, O king.” (I'm about to find out who blushes.) We find a woman “faint with love,” saying, “Night after night on my bed I have sought my true love.” She declares, “My beloved is mine, and I am his.” In turn, we find a groom courting his bride, saying, “You have stolen my heart... Your lips drip sweetness like the honeycomb.” He whispers to her of the “curves” of her “thighs,” exclaiming, “How beautiful, how entrancing you are, my loved one, daughter of delights.” He instructs his companions, “Eat, friends, and drink deep, till you are drunk with love.”

Wow. If all the Bible were like this, we'd have a lot more people on Sundays. I think we just found our new marketing campaign.

All kidding aside, it's important that this was chosen as part of our sacred text. It stands as a counterpoint to every pulpit that has ever shamed us. It says that bodies are good. Romantic love is good. Sexuality is good. It gives us a woman who speaks for herself, who has the same right as any man to desire and choose her partner. It gives us a mutual, joyful love of shared consent and agency—a love that dignifies, not denigrates. It even describes this woman as being black and looked down upon, and this holy text tells us that she is beautiful.

Even if we stopped at a literal reading, this is a liberating text in a Bible and a world where desire is often violent and exploitative, and where the proposed solution is often to denigrate desire itself. This song says desire's not the problem; the problem is when we misdirect and misuse desire to hurt others or ourselves or God.

The meaning, however, doesn't stop there. Historically, when Jews and Christians read this song, they said: wait a second, I relate to this not only on a personal romantic level, but this is how I feel about God. I desire God. I want a purpose; I want the beauty and goodness of God; I don't want to be broken anymore; I want to be whole, with God.

Reading this song allegorically, ancient rabbis said God was the groom, and Israel the bride. Then, in early Christianity, it became Christ and the church. Paul, of course, uses this language too. But where it gets really interesting, said some theologians, is when we imagine the bride as the soul and the groom as God, each seeking the other. The great early Egyptian theologian Origen writes that it's as if we've stepped into a direct conversation, a love song, between God and the soul—our soul.

This means that, not only do we passionately desire God, but God passionately desires us. God needs us.

We have to pause for a moment to appreciate the radicality, the controversy, of that statement. According to the philosophers and the theologians, God is not supposed to need anything. God is perfect. God is Superman without kryptonite. Need implies lack, and that sort of ruins the whole perfection thing. Passion's even worse; that implies emotion and change, and God is supposed to be unchanging.

God is supposed to love us through *agape*, a Greek word that shows up frequently in the New Testament. The First Letter of John reads, "God is *Agape*." C.S. Lewis calls this "gift love." It is an outpouring of grace, needing nothing from us in return. This unselfish love doesn't care if you're bad or ugly; it loves you anyway. No matter what. It's a beautiful, revolutionary concept of love. It challenged the exploitative practices in Greek and Roman society, in which the powerful took advantage of the disenfranchised, namely women and children, reducing them to objects to be used and tossed aside, as soon as one's desire was sated.

God doesn't use people. God doesn't discard people. God doesn't love only the righteous or the intelligent or the beautiful; God loves everyone—because God's love isn't about who we are; God's love is about who God is.

I believe in the *agape* of God with all my heart. There's just one problem. Here, in the Song of Solomon, we have the word of God describing God's love, not as *agape*, but as *eros*, a Greek word for passionate desire. C.S. Lewis calls this "need love." It is a recognition of the goodness, the wisdom, the beauty, of another, and saying, I want to be a part of that; I want to share that. When Aristophanes describes *eros* in Plato's *Symposium*, he says, "Each one longed for its other half, and so they would throw their arms about each other, weaving themselves together, wanting to grow together."

I think that, in combining these two seemingly contradictory ideas of love, Holy Scripture is telling us that we need both. And maybe God does too.

We need the God of *agape* and the God of *eros*.

We need the God who is perfect, and self-sufficient, and changeless. And we need the God who is vulnerable, who experiences passion, who suffers with us and gets angry when we're hurt—maybe even a God who evolves, a God who is not complete without us, just as we are not complete without God. We need both, just as we need Jesus of the cross and Jesus of the resurrection, just as we need the God of Genesis One who perfectly orders the cosmos from high above and the God of Genesis Two who kneels in the dust, kisses us on the lips, and breathes life into us.

Agape without *eros* is sterile. *Eros* without *agape* is fickle. We need a God whose love comes to us even when we're feeling or behaving unworthy, an unconditional, perfect love, but we also need a God whose love tells us that there's something in us that *is* worthy, that's beautiful and good. Yes, we need God, the holy mystery, the first principle, but we also need a friend, a parent, a lover.

What Scripture tells us is that God is big enough to be both.

The implication is that, for much of Christian history, we have spoken only to half of God, to half of God's love, and thereby we have also artificially divided human love. We have said this is good love and that's bad love. It's time to restore the unity of love.

There is only one undivided reality, only one love, and that love is God. From the love we first feel as children for our parents to our first crush as adolescents, from friendship to sexuality, from marriage to becoming a parent, from helping others to life's passions of music, art, or nature, from God's love for us to our love for God, it's all one story. One love.

You might say, "That's impossible! How can these contradictions co-exist?" I might reply that God is a mystery and paradox who transcends our human ideas, and we need only accept the witness of Scripture, which says both are true. But I can also reply that, if God is truth (the term by which we define and understand reality), then all things true (all things real) exist as part of God, an expression or image of God, including whatever is true or real in us. Which means that God can desire and need us, while still being perfect and complete, because we are part of God. God never in fact lost us; we just forgot. God's true desire is to remind us: "You are mine, and I am yours."

Here in this Song of Songs, as we listen to God and the soul speak—sing—to each other, what we hear is that we need God, for without God we are not whole, and what we also hear is that God needs us, seeks us, loves us, not simply through a dispassionate universal love but also through a particular love, a love for you, and you alone.

This love song is, and always has been, a duet: God and you, *agape* and *eros*, perfection and vulnerability, grace and desire. Precisely the song we need to save us. **Amen.**