

“Your Heart is Like . . .”
Excerpts from Song of Songs
2:11-13; 1:4b; 7:11-12; 8:6-7; 5:1

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It is an understatement to say that *Song of Songs*, is as one commentator put it a “remarkable departure from that of other books in the bible.”

Last summer Virginia Fifield and I taught a two-Sunday class that focused upon the *Song of Songs*, with the help of a video created by a Hebrew Bible professor.¹ In some of your bibles at home, you may find that this book is named the “Song of Solomon.” As with many other books of the Bible, a famous name is often associated with a book to give it more weight. Now it is generally referred to as the “Song of Songs,” which means “The Superlative Song,” the “Song above all other songs . . .”

I confessed to that class last summer that I had never preached from this book, nor have I ever heard a sermon based on this book of the Bible. The class challenged me to do so. At the time I said, “Well, maybe on St. Valentine’s Week-End.”

Happy St. Valentine’s Week-End!

The reason I, and most ministers, have not preached on the *Song of Songs* is that it is a book about love. Now, that sounds absurd. We often consider Love (with a capital) as a synonym for God, “God is Love.” Over and over we use “love” as an adjective for God. “Loving God . . .”

The difference is that *The Song of Songs* is about *human* love, and in it the lovers speak sensually, longingly to each other. They make strange-to-our-ears descriptions about a lot of body parts: eyes, hair, teeth, lips, cheeks, necks, and even breasts.

However, as I read through the book several times, I’d have to say that if this book were made into a movie today, it would be “G” rated. This is fascinating, given that there is a great deal of the Bible which would be rated “R,” due to the violence in those passages.

If we were to open up the Hebrew Bible *at random* we’d come upon stories of heroism and tribal conflict. We’d likely come upon descriptions of political disputes, royal intrigue, or divine judgment.

The *Song of Songs* takes us into an entirely different world, one of playfulness, of human affection, of interpersonal conversation between two people who love each other. There is a third voice in these songs—that of a group of woman who offer advice. We might think of them as the woman’s “girlfriends.”ⁱⁱ These two lovers are not kings, judges, political rulers or even prophets. The two who are talking back and forth are a young man and young woman—we do not know who they are or if they actually were real people, but we can agree that they represent in a sense “every person” who dares to love.

When couples come to Karen or to me to ask us to officiate at their wedding, we often give the couple a workbook by the United Methodist publishing company. The book raises many topics that are good to discuss before a couple marries. We do not require couples to study the book, but we offer it to them, free, so that they might notice topics that they had not previously discussed with the intent that they might be encouraged to do so. Not too long ago a bride-to-be who read through the book between our sessions said, “I like this book; *it’s realistic*.” The *Song of Songs* is mostly poetry, but it is a realistic book, especially if we read it with the help of scholars who help us to understand it!

Valentine's Day is probably the day of the year least realistic about love. The rest of the year, and even for many on Valentine's Day, we face the realism of relationships and love. Love is wonderful, and realistically, there are some challenges in almost every relationship. That's true of these two lovers who share beautiful poetry back and forth to each other.ⁱⁱⁱ

For years many scholars declared that the *Song of Songs* wasn't really about human love. All the sensual imagery was really an allegory for the love of *God for Israel* or the *love of Christ for the church*, several thousand years before Christ was born. This interpretation is possible, but very unlikely. It is more likely that the various attempts to say that the love in this book is God's or Christ's reveals a squeamishness on the part of us readers to appreciate, recognize and even be grateful that human sensuality is presented in the Bible. Notice that most male-female relationships in the Bible are discussed in terms of property exchange; love was not a major theme.

We can be grateful that this book is in our Bible, because our human bodies and human love are good parts of the creation God encouraged and keeps encouraging into being. Our Bible includes a lot about life—good things such as bonds between sisters and closeness between men who fight together in battle. Our bible includes a lot about life—jealousy, envy, forgiveness. Our bible includes some horrible things about life such as murder and rape.^{iv}

Our Bible includes a lot about life—so it makes sense that it includes a realistic look at human love and human sensuality, through the eyes of two who are love-struck, but who do, like most human lovers, have some challenges to overcome.

At the 200-member church where our family belonged for 21 years in Dayton, Ohio, we taught the excellent United Methodist curriculum on “Sexuality Education” for our 4,5,6th graders. One year our daughter was in 6th grade when our son was in 4th grade, so they both took the course. That year we on the team who taught the class were extremely flexible. We made it a week-end retreat with great food—pizza of course—and we set the times to avoid every single child's team sports. So, for example, we'd take a 3 hour break when someone had a soccer game. It worked out very well.

When our son left promptly after being with his soccer team, he explained to the other boys, “I need to get back to my church for sexuality education.”

I have no idea how other boys heard that comment, but I was personally very pleased—both that our son unabashedly connected “church” and “sexuality education” in the same thought and that it seemed so natural to our congregation to create that mood.

I've realized that one reason it's a challenge to “preach” on this book of the bible is that it is a challenge to discover a “message” for us.

It is wrong to think that every text in the bible is telling us what “to do.” A lot of the bible consists of stories and histories about people whom we really do not want to copy. The Bible shows us people of faith who struggle to be faithful.

The *Song of Songs* doesn't come right out and say anything about God. And, this book doesn't seem to be presenting any “rules” or “laws.” There is a repeated refrain, “Don't hurry love,” or “Don't awaken love until ready.” This refrain seems wise, though exactly what it means is unclear.^v

I have found a creative idea that we could use tomorrow, on Valentine's Day. If you make your own greeting card or text a message, you might do what these two lovers were great at—make a personal creative comparison for your loved one. These two lovers name a body part of the other that they like and make a comparison between that part and something else that is good or beautiful. For example, “Your hair is like a flock of goats.” We might laugh, not so sure

that this is a compliment, but if the comparison were made 3,000 years ago, there was probably a different significance to goat's hair. In fact, it is suggested that "your hair is like a flock of goats" might mean for us something like, "Your hair is like cashmere."

If you want to get into the spirit of these two biblical lovers, you'll need to be playful, imaginative, and willing to be imprecise with your comparisons. Get into a spirit of daring abandon and make your positive metaphors or similes extravagant. For example, you can say, "**Your heart is like** a hillside of wildflowers!" A few of our class members last summer got into this spirit, and I've listed their ideas at the end of the bulletin. Christine Smith was especially creative!

One reason this book may have been included in the bible is that it was loved. People cited it and sang it. By the 2nd century after Christ, some of the *Song of Song's* lyrics had become very well known. Our choir today sang an anthem based on this book: "Set me as a seal upon your heart."

While giving the gift of creative metaphorical comparisons for Valentines may be an idea that can come from this book, obviously that was not the intent.

Here's a more helpful meaning that we might get from this book:

Love is complex. There are all sorts of complicated emotions, challenges and limitations. Love includes longing, dependence, and yearning.

While we might cite Shakespeare, "To be or not to be," this book evokes the question: "to love or not to love."

If we truly love, we are vulnerable. A one-page article by a Christian Ethicist made a huge impression upon me. The ethicist proposed that the number one, primary guideline for loving relationships is this: **Equal Vulnerability**. Physically, emotionally, mentally, a love relationship seems ethical, wise, and caring if there is "equal vulnerability." In other words, each risks equally. One is not free of consequences while the other risks consequences. I recall a conversation when our children were teenagers; they asked some questions about sexuality guidelines. I said "equal vulnerability" was my view of the primary guideline. That was surely not what they expected, and it led into quite an important conversation!

When I started this sermon I mentioned that this book has been called a "remarkable departure from other books in the bible." One huge way in which it is "a remarkable departure" is precisely that there appears to be equality between the female and male. The woman speaks for herself. The man does too, but many men in the bible speak for themselves. It's hard to believe, but this woman who is loved and who loves is *the only woman in the entire bible who speaks for herself*. She's the only woman whose voice is heard directly. Every other place we hear about a woman, it's through the words of a narrator, someone speaking about the woman.

The very fact that the woman and the man both speak their own voices communicates that they are each vulnerable and courageous. They assert their love; they are willing to influence and also *to be* influenced by the other.

This love poetry does not present a simple road for love. Class and race seem to be relevant and may be creating some barriers or prejudices. The woman says, "I am black and beautiful." We do not know whether she is suntanned from working in the sun, which means she would likely be of a lower class, or whether she is dark-skinned. It appears that the man is not as dark.

These lovers express their happiness in spite of the complications and limitations. Every one of us can recognize in them our own flawed demonstration and practice of love, whether in relationship with lovers, siblings, parents, children, or friends.

We all have the need to be loved. We all confront ambivalences, within ourselves and in regard to messages from our culture.

Finally this couple pledges their love—as more powerful than any opposing force. If this were a movie, the most dramatic music would occur at that point.

These who call each other the Arabic words for “Loved” and “Beloved” throughout this book, these who are the Romeo and Juliet of the bible face the ambiguities of love to the very end, leaving us to wonder whether “they will ever be allowed to relax in their relationship.”

After all this, what does it mean that there is no resolution or conclusion? Maybe this book is a mirror, held up to us, about human love, a very realistic mirror. The question we ponder is, “Is love worth it?” or more precisely, “Is searching for genuine love between equals worth it?”

When we name our God, “Love,” it’s pretty hard not to answer in the affirmative.

ⁱ Lisa Wolfe video for Living the Questions, Song of Songs

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ If we compared this “most superlative song” to a genre of music today, it might be our American blues tradition, because in both we find very personal struggles—the joys and sorrows of love

^{iv} Sometimes we mistake rape for sex; it is not. Rape is violence. (If a person used a hammer and nails to injure another person, we would not call it “carpentry,” would we? We would accurately name it violence.)

^v In another place the meaning is more likely, “Don’t disturb love.”