

Song of Songs 8:6-7

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C, Proper 11)

Lessons for the Day: Genesis 18:1-14; Colossians 1:21-29; Luke 10:38-42

The Power of Love

July 21, 2019

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

For the second time in as many months, I am preaching on a text that we are more likely going to hear at a wedding than at any other time. The first time was at the LWML convention, when I preached on Ruth’s words to Naomi: *“For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.”* (Ruth 1:16-17, ESV)

Now, as requested, we have this sermon on the Song of Songs (or the Song of Solomon). I have only preached on this book once before, and that was for a wedding. The specific questions asked for this sermon were, “Is Song of Songs ever included in the lectionary”, the series of lessons that we use for the church year? The answer is, “no, we don’t use it in the lectionary we follow today.” It is included in some of the historic lectionaries, however. The second question was, “isn’t the book a little suggestive for the church?” There is no denying that this is a passionate, intimate song, written by Solomon for his bride. It does have a sensuality that makes many Christians uncomfortable. But remember who invented sex. It was God’s idea, and was intended by Him as an expression of the unique and special relationship between a bride and groom, between husband and wife, so that marriage became the most intimate and fulfilling relationship in all the world. When we see this from God’s perspective, no, it is not too suggestive for the church.

While the Song may not be popular as a source of sermon material today, it is interesting to note that there has been perhaps more written on this small book than on most other Old Testament books. Bernard of Clairvaux died in 1153, having delivered 86 sermons on this book, and he had only reached chapter 2. One reason, both for its past popularity and its less frequent use today stems from the fact that it is a difficult book to interpret. It has even been called the most obscure book in the Old Testament.

And yet, the theme of the book is rather simple. On one level, it is a simple love song, speaking of the beauty of love and marriage. But it points to another love, the love between Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom and His bride, the church. It is to remind us of the intimacy that exists between God and the people He has redeemed as His own.

God created marriage as the union of one man and one woman into one flesh, to be the expression of the greatest love and bond in this world. The love of husband and wife transcends even the love of a parent for a child, or of a child for his parents. It is greater than brotherly love, or the love we feel for our nearest and dearest friends. It should come as no surprise then, that God uses what is to be the most intimate and exclusive relationship of which human beings are capable as a description of His love and of His covenant with fallen mankind, and particularly with His church. Throughout Scripture God refers to Himself as a bridegroom, who comes and unites Himself with His bride, the church. In the Song of Songs, the wonder of this love is described in the most beautiful way, as Christ reveals to His bride the power of His love—a love greater than death, sorrow and struggle; a love that transcends all loves and brings the greatest blessings to the people who are united with the True Bridegroom in that love He so freely gives to us.

While the Song describes the beauty and sensuality of marital love, it also shows the wisdom of reserving the body for marriage and genuine love. The Song connects the passion of love to the power of the Lord, comparing love to *the very flame of the LORD*. It is such a priceless love that it cannot be bought. It is a love made known in faithfulness, devotion

and the “forsaking of all others”.

That is exactly the type of loving relationship which Jesus Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, wants to share with the church, His bride. He loves us with the greatest of all loves. He wants to care for us and share with us. He wants us to enjoy the fulness of a love so deep, so special, so intimate, that all loves pale by comparison. What makes His desire for us all the more interesting is the fact that we aren't exactly the greatest catch in the world. Remember that when we talk about the church as the bride of Christ, we are actually talking about the members of the church. And when we look at ourselves as either the betrothed of the Lord or as the bride of Christ, would we be able to say that we have been faithful to our God, to our bridegroom? If you want to see another way in which the Bible uses this illustration, read the book of Hosea, and the account of Hosea and his unfaithful wife, Gomer. God actually commanded his prophet to marry a woman who would be unfaithful, as a symbol of the unfaithfulness of the people towards God. But have we been any different? Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is: ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*** (Matthew 22:37, ESV) But have we done that? Have we loved our God totally, completely, exclusively? How often have we been unfaithful by loving other things more than our bridegroom? How often have we chased after other lovers: pleasure, prestige, fame or wealth? How often have we forgotten the love of God because we are too busy loving ourselves, seeking the things that we want, without any regard for the One who loves us? We have been unfaithful to our God; adulterers who have betrayed the great love that Christ has given to us in taking us to Himself as His bride.

But our Bridegroom reaches out in love to his unfaithful people to win them back, to woo them and restore them in that intimate relationship He wants us to share with Him. Our text says: ***love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.*** The real power of love is this: that while we may be fickle lovers, His love is greater than all of our unfaithfulness. St. Paul reminds us: ***“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”*** (Ephesians 5:25–27, ESV) Even though we are unworthy of such love, our Saviour came to love us with His everlasting love. His love for us burned like a blazing fire. The fire of His love burns so greatly that even the waters of the mightiest rivers cannot drown out that love. It was that love that moved Him to come and willingly gave His life for us on the cross. There are those who love and who say, “I would die for you”. They would do it for someone who loves them. Christ suffered and died because our unfaithfulness. He died because of our sinfulness. His love is a saving love, a life-giving love. In His death He brought us the forgiveness that covers our adultery. He brought the cleansing that restores us as His bride. And, best of all, He proves that His love is greater than death, as He rises again from the dead to be the love of our life for all eternity.

This is the power of God's love, that He can reach out to unfaithful people like you and me and restore us as His most beloved treasure. He does indeed, place us as a seal upon His heart and on His arm. He comes to us in the most intimate of ways, through His true presence with us in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. He comes to forgive, restore and reaffirm the love He has for us. Now, in the power of that love, we can love Him, too. John tells us: ***“We love because he first loved us.”*** (1 John 4:19, ESV) Because of His love we are able to live as His faithful people, enjoying the oneness and intimacy of Him who has done everything for us and for our salvation.

When a man and woman meet together at the front of the church to pledge their love forever, they hope to see the blessings of their love last a lifetime. But, as one pastor noted: ***“I have often observed many married couples coming together in such great passion that they were ready to devour each other for love, but after a half year the one ran away from the other.”*** Oh, by the way, the pastor who said that was Martin Luther. Things haven't changed much over the years, have they? But even though our love may be fickle, God's love is sure and certain, faithful and true. Paul understood the power of that love when he wrote: ***“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** (Romans 8:38–39, ESV) Even when our love is weak and failing, even when we aren't the faithful bride God would have us to be, His great love for us in Jesus Christ is perfect and faithful and true. He loves us beyond anything we can imagine. He loves us so much, that He always stands

ready to take us back, to forgive us and restore us as His bride. As His bride, we enjoy not only the intimacy we have with Christ, but also the care, help and support He provides for each day. He will care for us, and He brings us into His eternal home, that we may rejoice in a love greater than death; a love more passionate than even that of the greatest lovers in this world. This love, the love of Christ for His bride, is the love that lasts forever—and there is nothing like the power of His love and the life we share with Him. Amen.