

“A Time for Love”

Song of Songs 2:9-13; 4:1-3, 7; 7:1-12

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

March 11, 2018

“The Song of Songs, which is for Solomon.” That’s how this book begins, this very *interesting* and *unusual* book of the Bible. Eight chapters of love poetry. There’s a man and a woman. He thinks she is supremely beautiful; she thinks he is marvelously handsome; both desire physical intimacy with each other; both of them offer themselves to each other; both of them enjoy the fruits of the garden of love. The book is evocative and erotic. It is, at times, rather explicit; at other times it is highly suggestive; you’re reading along and you come to a metaphor, and you do a double-take; you think, “Wait, is this *really* talking about what I *think* it’s talking about?” – and the answer is, yes, it really is. And at some point along the way, you wonder, “What’s this book doing in the *Bible*?!”

We don’t really know when it was written. Some people think it was written by Solomon; he is mentioned several times in the book. More likely, it was written quite a while later in honor of Solomon, or inspired by Solomon. If you’re looking for somebody in the Bible who enjoyed erotic love, Solomon would stand at the top of the list; last month we talked about his sexual excesses, which brought ruin both to himself and his country. There was debate in ancient Judaism about this book; some rabbis thought it bordered on vulgar, while others defended its virtues. Rabbi Akiva, a generation or two after Jesus, said that “all of eternity in its entirety is not as worthy as the day on which Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.” Many Jews have interpreted the book as an allegory for the faithful, abiding love between God and Israel, and portions of the book are read in worship every Passover. Many Christians have similarly interpreted the book as an allegory for the self-giving relationship between Christ and the Church. In the Middle Ages, Christians started to identify the woman in the book with the Virgin Mary, which is a very interesting interpretation, since the traditional doctrine is that Mary gave birth to Jesus without having sex. Joseph and Mary did have other children *after* Jesus was born, so Mary was not sexless forever, but still....

At face value, the book truly is about sexual longing and intimacy between a man and a woman. A husband and wife, really; six times the man refers to the woman as his bride, suggesting that they are newly married. She scans him from head to toe and declares that “every bit of him is desirable” (Song 5:16). He looks at everything from her hair to her feet and says, “You are utterly beautiful, my dearest” (Song 4:7). She invites him to “be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spice” (Song 8:14); “let my love come to his garden; let him eat its luscious fruit!” (Song 4:16) We’ll pull the curtain now, and let them have their privacy, because clearly they intend to enjoy this moment.

It’s important to note that *both* of them are enjoying this intimacy. This is not just one person

taking advantage of or exploiting another. This is fully consensual love, fully desired by both parties, fully enjoyed by both parties. *That's the way it's supposed to be.* We hear so many stories, in the news and in the lives of people we know, of sex that's different than that, sex that is manipulative or coercive or abusive; sex that does not respect the full dignity of the other person. *That is not God's vision for sex.* In the Song of Songs, we see mutuality, respect, trust. There's desire, for sure; these people clearly want to *look* at each other, *touch* each other, *enjoy* one other – but it's a *shared* desire. *She* wants it every bit as much as *he* does, and she *enjoys* it every bit as much as he does. They don't want to *take* something from each other – they want to *give* something to each other. The precious gift of intimacy, the fullest expression of love between a man and a woman, freely offered, freely enjoyed.

We live in a world that is utterly saturated with sexual imagery and innuendo. Many of our children and youth are being exposed to explicit pictures and videos, either by their peers or out of their own curiosity, easily satisfied. When I was a kid, the *Playboy* centerfold was the big deal. Today – *that's nothing.* What many kids are being exposed to today is so much more graphic than that. The pictures and videos are not about *love*, they're not about *intimacy*, they're not about *commitment.* They take something special, something sacred, and turn it into a commodity that can be bought and sold, used and abused. It cheapens and demeans everything God intended sex to be. I believe one of the reasons why this is so prevalent is because we – the Church of Jesus Christ – haven't done a good job talking about sexuality. We tend to avoid the subject; we get embarrassed when it comes up; we don't really want to admit that it's something we actually *enjoy*; we don't do a good job preparing our children and youth for the joys and the challenges of a committed marital relationship. We even have trouble mentioning the words "God" and "sex" in the same sentence. It's time we get over that.

What's the very first instruction God gives to humanity in the Bible? "Be fruitful and multiply." (Genesis 1:28) Seriously. It's the *first thing* God tells us to do. Before "love God," before "love neighbor," before any of the commandments, the *very first instruction to humanity* is: *go make love!*

Which brings me to the first of three key points I want you to walk away with today. *God created sex not just for procreation, but also for our enjoyment.* God designed our bodies so that we could have sex. It didn't have to be that way. God could have made it so that women lay eggs, like hens, and the men would come along and fertilize them. Or God could have made it so that we reproduce asexually, like fungi and plants. But no, God created us "male and female"; God gave us this anatomy, these bodies. And God made it so that stimulation produces pleasure. This is all part of God's *design.* God intended for us to have sex, and God wanted it to be pleasurable, for *both* parties. The fact that the Song of Songs is in the Bible, *God's Word* to us, tells us there's nothing to be ashamed of. The man and woman clearly enjoy looking at one another and taking pleasure in one another. Sex is *good.*

But it *has* to be mutual. This is second thing I want you to remember from today. For sex to be as God intended, it *has* to be a mutually enriching and beneficial experience. It is *abundantly* mutual here in the Song of Songs. It is also abundantly mutual in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians, Paul responds to some questions about sex and relationships, and he says this: "The husband should meet his wife's sexual needs, and the wife should do the same for her husband. The wife doesn't have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise, the husband doesn't have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Don't refuse to meet each other's needs unless you both agree for a short period of time to devote yourselves to prayer." (1 Corinthians 7:2-5) Do you hear how *egalitarian* that

is? How much *parity* there is between husband and wife? A Christian view of sex is one in which *both parties* give and receive, desire and enjoy, *equally*. Anything other than that is *not* sex as God intended.

Third, and finally. There are some boundaries. The New Testament repeatedly says, in book after book, that there's this thing called *porneia* that Christians need to avoid. That's a Greek word that a broad category for "sexual immorality." In Acts 15, in the big summit meeting where the early Christian leaders conclude that non-Jews can be Christians too, one of the key stipulations is that they avoid "sexual immorality," *porneia* (Acts 15:20, 29). In Colossians Paul tells us to "put to death the parts of your life that belong to the earth, such as sexual immorality" (Colossians 3:5); in 1 Thessalonians he says that "God's will is that your lives are dedicated to him; this means that you stay away from sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3); in the book of Revelation, Jesus laments that in some of the churches Christians have fallen back into sexual immorality (Revelation 2:14, 20). There are about thirty-five references to *porneia* in the New Testament, and when you go to the effort to look them all up – which I have done – the message is *remarkably* clear and consistent. Adultery, prostitution, incest, bestiality, fornication (sleeping together without being married), sex with more than one partner – all of these are forms of *porneia*, "sexual immorality," in the eyes of the New Testament writers and the leaders of the early church. To that list I would add voyeurism, exhibitionism, going to strip clubs, and viewing pornography. It doesn't matter what you may have done *before* you were a Christian, but once you *are* a Christian, all of that needs to go. For Christians, the *only* appropriate context for sexual activity is with your spouse. So if you're single and burning with passion, Paul says, *get married!* (1 Corinthians 7:9)

But what about homosexuality? You're probably aware that there has been *huge* debate about this in denominations like ours. There are four things I believe every Christian needs to know: (1) the American Psychiatric Association stopped considering homosexuality a "disorder" back in 1974, and the American Psychological Association did the same a year later; (2) the Bible gives us absolutely *no* right to pass judgment on people who aren't Christians; (3) in the first couple centuries of the church, Christians made *no* effort to change the laws of the state but instead held to their *own* standards of conduct, which sometimes differed from those of society at large; and (4) there are three New Testament passages (Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:9-10) that seem to say that homosexual activity is not appropriate for Christians. The interpretation and application of those three passages has been at the heart of the debate. I would say that anyone who wants to have an opinion on this subject needs to tread carefully here. Study the passages for yourselves; don't just rely on what other people have said. If you want to hold a position that differs from the traditional Christian view, make sure you can defend it both biblically and theologically. Don't just have an opinion – have an *informed* opinion.

So, to reiterate the main points: (1) God created sex not just for procreation, but also for enjoyment; (2) for sex to be as God intended, it has to be a mutually enriching and beneficial experience for both parties; and (3) Christians need to avoid all forms of sexual immorality, *regardless* of what people in wider society may be doing, *regardless* of what you may see in movies or on TV or online. God calls us Christians to a higher standard. Sex is a precious gift, a blessed trust. Let's not abuse it.

© 2018 Rev. Bill Pinches