

12.5.21

Love Is Stronger Than Death**Song of Solomon 2:10-13; 4:1-5:1; 8:6-7****Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

When you think of God, what words and images come to mind? God is many things and can be described in a host of ways, but one thing God is without a shadow of a doubt – **God is a passionate lover**. I'm guessing that wasn't the first thought that came into your mind about God. We know God is a passionate lover from many passages in the Bible that describe the love of God including today's book of the Bible Song of Solomon also known as Song of Songs. We know it from the prophets Isaiah and Hosea as well as these verses from **1 John 4:7-12**, "Beloved, let us **love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love**. God's **love** was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is **love**, not that we **loved** God but that he **loved** us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God **loved** us so much, we also ought to **love** one another. No one has ever seen God; if we **love** one another, God lives in us, and his **love** is perfected in us."

From these verses we learn that God is love, God is the source of human love, God's love is self-giving and self-sacrificing. We love others because God first loved us, and when we love others, God lives in us. Unfortunately, the word "love" can lose its power to communicate. My seminary friend Paul Baker who is a pastor in Minnesota shared with me how imagining love in a new way, helps us hear this passage in a fresh way. For example, replacing the word "love" with "warm chocolate chip cookies," the passage from 1st John sounds like this:

7 Dear friends, let us give warm chocolate chip cookies to one another, for warm chocolate chip cookies come from God. Everyone who gives warm chocolate chip cookies has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not give warm chocolate chip cookies does not know God, because God is warm chocolate chip cookies. 9 This is how God gave his warm chocolate chip cookies to us: He sent his only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is warm chocolate chip cookies: not that we give warm chocolate chip cookies to God, but that he gave warm

chocolate chip cookies to us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so gave warm chocolate chip cookies to us, we also ought to give warm chocolate chip cookies to one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we give warm chocolate chip cookies to one another, God lives in us, and his warm chocolate chip cookies are made complete in us.”

All human love – spouse to spouse, parent to child, family member to family member, friend to friend, follower of Jesus to anyone else – all these examples of love are based on God’s love for us. Love in the Bible is characterized by self-giving and self-sacrifice. In the Bible we hear about **four forms of love**. Three are: family love (Storge), brotherly love (Philia), and God's divine love which seeks the good of the other (Agape). The fourth form of love is romantic love (Eros) which Song of Songs describes. Song of Songs is a love song and while not everyone here or watching is married, I hope talking about love and how love is to be in a marriage and in all our relationships can be useful for each of us.

Do you have a favorite song or two about love? What are some you like? From pop to musicals, the great American song book to any genre of music – there are thousands of songs about looking for love (sometimes in all the wrong places), falling in love, being in love, losing love, and staying in love. If you start thinking about love songs, titles will come in a flood. The songs will be different depending on your age and musical taste.

Love songs are as old as humanity - see Ezekiel 33:32 NIV, *“Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.”* Song of Songs is like a love song. It’s mostly a duet between a woman and man, singing about their love and desire for one another. Over the centuries some Bible scholars have tried to say that Song of Songs is an allegory about God’s love for Israel or for the church, which is quite a stretch. Sit down and read the book aloud and you know what it is – love poetry. Perhaps because for many years the church was reticent to talk about our physical bodies and sex, even between a husband and wife, an allegory seemed a safe way to describe the Song of Solomon. But it is what it is, love poetry that is beautifully descriptive and at times sensual.

You might ask, “Why did God put eight chapters of love poetry in the Bible? Perhaps the answer is: **Who we love and how to love are among the most important and impactful choices we make in life.** Song of Songs is about attraction, faithfulness, warding off temptation to cheat, the preciousness of love, its joys and pleasures, the dangers of infidelity and the fact that true love is as strong as death and can never be extinguished. The nature of this love is expressed in **Song of Songs 8:6-7** (NRSV): “*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.

Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

7 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.”

Song of Songs, opens with a young woman saying (1.2), “*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!*” A young man in springtime calls out to his beautiful lover to go with him to the hills. Anyone who has ever been in love can relate to the eagerness and longing of that scene. Because this book of love poetry is in the Bible, it is clear God approves of sexual desire and love appropriately expressed. Some branches of the church have elevated celibacy or chastity as higher forms of spiritual devotion to God. Among some expressions of the Christian faith, sexual desire became something that was regarded as “dirty” rather than as an expression of our God given nature. One of the best-known mistranslations in the King James Version occurs in **Song of Songs 2:12**, which is, “*The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and **the voice of the turtle** is heard in our land.*” I don’t know exactly what the voice of a turtle sounds like, but it’s romantic to imagine that even a turtle seeks a lover.

God thinks sex is a wonderful thing, after all God is the one who created it. Song of Songs is full of the language and imagery of passionate love between a bride and groom. The pair sings of a walled garden (4:12, 15, 16; 5:1), a secret place open only to the devoted couple. There they enjoy mutual delight and intimacy, with a heightened appreciation of the beauty around them and between them.

Throughout the **Bible we learn that love in all its forms and contexts is a set of attitudes and actions** that are far broader than the concept of love as a physical or romantic attraction. **Love is a set of behaviors that you live out.** How do you do this?

Gary Chapman's book, *The Five Love Languages* outlines five ways that people express and experience love. The "love languages" are **acts of service, gift-giving, physical touch, quality time, and words of affirmation**. Can you identify which ones are most important for you? What about for your spouse, family members, or a close friend? It's helpful to know because we want to express love to people in ways that mean the most to them.

The most familiar description of this active love is in **1 Corinthians 13:4-8**: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."*

Love always protects. Love doesn't attack one's spouse. Love goes out of its way to protect one's spouse. Love always trusts and is prepared to give one's partner the benefit of the doubt over and over again. Love hopes, which means that love is prepared to hope the best about your partner. Love perseveres, it is a commitment to work things out together. The French writer Antoine de St. Exupery wrote, *"Love does not consist in gazing at each other, (one perfect sunrise gazing at another!) But in looking outward together in the direction."*

The net result is that **love never fails. That doesn't mean love always succeeds. It means that love keeps on keeping on and** even death can't stop it. Having the holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas just four weeks apart, times that we associate with spending time with loved ones, can make our sense of grief or loss more acute. This can be a tough time of the year for some people even as it's a wonderful time for others. Christ whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, conquered death and in the resurrection, we see that God's love is stronger than death. Love is also stronger than death because we remember those we loved and carry them in our hearts and memories even after they're no longer physically with us.

One of the ways love is able to keep going in a marriage and in any relationship is through laughter, a cheerful heart, and not taking oneself too seriously. Let's face it many women have their hands full dealing with work, kids, as well as their spouses. A woman emailed me the following story: "One day, a seamstress

was sewing while sitting close to a river and her thimble fell into the river. When she cried out, the Lord appeared and asked, *"My dear child, why are you crying?"* The seamstress replied that her thimble had fallen into the water and that she needed it to help her husband in making a living for their family. The Lord dipped his hand into the water and pulled up **a golden thimble set with pearls**. *"Is this your thimble?"* the Lord asked. The seamstress replied, *"No."* The Lord again dipped into the river and held out **a silver thimble ringed with sapphires**. *"Is this your thimble?"* the Lord asked again. The seamstress replied, *"No."* The Lord reached down again and came up with **a leather thimble**. *"Is this your thimble?"* the Lord asked. The seamstress replied, *"Yes."* The Lord was pleased with the woman's honesty and gave her all three thimbles to keep, and the seamstress went home happy.

Some years later, the seamstress was walking with her husband along the same riverbank and her husband fell into the river and disappeared under the water. When she cried out, the Lord again appeared and asked her, *"Why are you crying?"*
"Oh Lord, my husband has fallen into the river!"

The Lord went down into the water and came up with **George Clooney**.

"Is this your husband?" the Lord asked. **"Yes,"** cried the seamstress. The Lord was furious. *"You lied! That's not true."* The seamstress replied, *"Forgive me, Lord. It's a misunderstanding. If I'd said 'no' to George Clooney, you would've come up with Brad Pitt. If I'd 'No' to him, you would've come up with my husband and had I said 'yes' you would've given me all three. Lord, I'm not in the best of health and wouldn't be able to take care of all three husbands, so that's why I said 'yes' to George Clooney."*

In the name of equal time, let me also say that a husband sent me an email about The Husband Store a store that sells husbands that has just opened in New York City, where a woman may go to choose a husband. The instructions at the entrance describe how the store operates. *"You may visit the store ONLY ONCE! There are 6 floors, and the attributes of the men increase as the shopper ascends the flights. There is, however, a catch... you may choose any man from a particular floor, or you may choose to go up a floor, but you cannot go back down except to exit the building!"* So, a woman goes to The Husband Store to find a husband.

On the first floor the sign on the door reads:

Floor 1 –These men have jobs and love the Lord. “*Not bad,*” but she moves on.

The second-floor sign reads: **Floor 2 – These men have jobs, love the Lord, and love kids.** “*Sounds good,*” but she continues upward.

The third-floor sign reads: **Floor 3 - These men have jobs, love the Lord, love kids, and are extremely good looking.** “*Wow,*” she thinks, but she feels compelled to keep going. She goes to the fourth floor and sign reads: **Floor 4 - These men have jobs, love the Lord, love kids, are drop- dead gorgeous and help with the housework.**

“*Mercy!*” she exclaims, Still, she goes to the fifth floor and the sign reads:

Floor 5 -These men have jobs, love the Lord, love kids, are drop-dead gorgeous, help with the housework, and have a strong romantic streak. She is so tempted to stay, but her suspense and curiosity gets the best of her and she continues to the sixth floor. She gets to the 6th floor and the sign reads: **Floor 6 -** “*You are visitor 4,363,912 to this floor. There are no men on this floor. This floor is here to simply prove that women are impossible to please. Thank you for shopping at The Husband Store. Watch your step as you exit the building and have a nice day!*”

Being able to laugh together – at oneself, at each other, at the absurdity of life is a good thing for all of us in our relationships, especially in a marriage. Humor is something that can stay with us throughout all the stages of life.

If you want to build a stronger marriage, sit down together and read Song of Songs aloud to each other from time to time because “The Song is concerned with how one person can respond faithfully to the attractiveness of and fulfill the needs of another. In most of the modern world, romance is thought of as something that *precedes* marriage. In the Song, *romance is something that should continue throughout and actually characterize marriage.* Let it be so.”¹

Prayer by Joyce Rupp

“God of affection, devotion, passion, tenderness, & all forms of love, this day we thank you for the myriad ways that we have been given a touch of your goodness...

...Love that draws us to friendship & fidelity,

¹ Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd edition, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1981, 1993), page 230.

...Love that leads us to kindness & compassion,
...Love that stirs in our flesh & dances in our bones,
...Love that lures us toward the sacred & serene,
...Love that calls us to new vision & growth,
...Love that soothes our heartaches & gentles our pain,
...Love that sees worth in each human being,
...Love that believes in us & whispers with hope,
...Love that sings in the seasons & sighs in the wind,
...Love that taps on the door of forgiveness,
...Love that longs for peace among all humankind,
...Love that surprises & fills us with awe,
...Love that sings praise for the face of earth's beauty,
...Love that offers the hand of warm welcome,
...Love that respects those who won't come too near,
...Love that urges to take risks & have courage,
...Love that goes out to those from afar,
...Love that embraces the shadow in us,
...Love that sheds the old skin & welcomes the new,
...Love that ripens our souls for the final journey home."

Blessing: 1 John 3:23,

*"And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ **and love one another, just as he had commanded us.**"*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What do you think of when you hear the word "love?" Who or what comes to mind for you?
2. If someone asked you to tell them about the love of God, how would you respond? What would you say?

3. If you are married or have been, what habits and ways of acting toward and communicating with your spouse are/were helpful in deepening and nurturing your relationship?

If you are currently living alone, what habits and ways of acting toward and communicating with your family members and friends are helpful in deepening and nurturing those relationships?

4. Gary Chapman's book, *The Five Love Languages* outlines five ways that people express and experience love. The "love languages" are acts of service, gift-giving, physical touch, quality time, and words of affirmation. Can you identify which ones are most important for you? What about for your spouse, family members, or a close friend? Why is it helpful to know?
5. Some people talk about love as a feeling, but the Bible often describes love not in terms of feelings, but in actions and attitudes. How would you describe love from a Biblical perspective? What verses or passages might you reference?
6. Why are laughter and humor important not just in a marriage relationship, but in any relationship?
7. Song of Songs asserts that "love is as strong as death." As Christians, why do we believe that love is stronger than death? What difference does that make?