

Introduction to the Theme:

Who can tell me what love looks like? [Family; friendship; “Love is like a red, red rose...”; love is sacrifice; images of Jesus; love is laying down one’s life for another/others.] My example: love presented itself to me this past week in the guise of a jar of honey—demonstrating that someone had listened, heard, and responded. I had mentioned that one of our sons was suffering terribly with allergies, and this individual presented me the next day with a jar of local honey, noting that it may or may not be true that local honey eaten over time is meant to be a good preventive measure for allergies. Love is a parsonage full of furniture, and a pantry/fridge stocked with food upon arrival and waiting for our stuff. Love is beautiful arrangements of flowers given to celebrate various occasions (our arrival; your anniversary).

The theme of today’s scripture lessons is love.

I want to suggest that the first text depicts the *aesthetic nature* of love, and the second talks about the *ethical nature* of love. (Obviously these are only two ways of looking at the subject of love—after all, it’s a massive and textured topic!) Love is colourful and beautiful and changes the way we see the world. But it’s also a calling and a responsibility, it’s active and demonstrative.

Love is God’s greatest gift, and it’s at the heart both of our *purpose*, and our *deepest longing* in life.

“Beloved: Be Love”

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The Congregational Church of Hollis, NH

Song of Songs 2:8-13

James 1:17-27

Proper 17B

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Do you like romance novels? Show of hands how many have read the entire book of the Song of Songs (a.k.a. Song of Solomon)? Well, if you like steamy romance novels, then you might really enjoy Song of Songs. Many people are shocked to discover the likes of it in the Holy Bible, but there it is; we just don’t hear it read very often in church. In fact, the lectionary only cites this book twice in the three-year cycle, and both times we read these same six verses. (Maybe the lectionary-devising team thought they were the least awkward, but still representative of the entire book, to read aloud in front of a congregation.)

Have you ever fallen head-over-heels in love? If you have, then the Song of Solomon will be a biblical book that you’ll probably resonate with—at least, you might recognize the sorts of feelings that would give rise to the author’s poetic language.

For those who’ve never read the Song of Solomon, the sentiments have been lyricized by countless other authors, poets, and singers over the years. Satchmo (Louis Armstrong) crooned it this way: *“I see trees of green, red roses too; I see them in bloom, for me and you... and I think to myself, ‘What a wonderful world.’ I see skies of blue, and clouds of white, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night. And I think to myself ‘What a wonderful world.’ I see friends shaking hands, sayin’, ‘How do you do?’ They’re really sayin’, ‘I love you.’”* (—See now, it only occurs to a person who’s in the throes of love that everyone saying, “How do you do?” is really saying, “I love you.”)

Karen Carpenter sang a similar song, with these words: *“Why do birds suddenly appear, every time you are near? Just like me, they long to be close to you. Why do stars fall down from the sky, every time you walk by? Just like me, they long to be close to you. On the day that you were born the angels got together and decided to create a dream come true. So, they sprinkled moon dust in your hair of gold, and starlight in your eyes of blue....”*

Those are just a couple of songs, but did you notice how both of them referred to the broad sweep of nature—night and day, stars, moon, and sun, trees and birds and flowers? That’s because people who are gripped by love feel more alive, they’re more awake to everything in the world. It’s more vivid, electric, charged with energy and beauty. Aesthetically speaking, it can be an all-consuming experience—highly charged with feeling, peaks and valleys of emotion, exhausting and wonderful; that’s the power of love.

I suspect that the majority of songs and poems and novels written about love refer to romantic love—but ask any parent or grandparent, and they’ll tell you that when you first hold a new-born son or daughter in your arms, the colors of the world seem somehow

brighter; time can stand still; your heart feels like it could possibly burst within you; and you feel a sense of connectedness to the whole of time and space and creation that doesn't often occur in the ordinariness of a common day. Similarly, small children express in lots of precious, often uninhibited, ways the wonder and mysterious force of connection they feel to their parents and others in their lives, feelings they learn to name as love.

At our very essence, we were made to give and receive love. That's the core message of Scripture. Song of Songs is a unique celebration of the experience between two lovers. Some, perhaps wishing to play down the sexually-charged nature of the book, have insisted that it's only meant to be symbolic of the relationship between God and Israel, or Christ and the Church at its best. And when it's read that way, it is still very powerful—but I'm convinced that we ought to read it on both levels. That way, it suggests the sheer passion God has for humankind, drawing attention to all of nature as expressing that delight. And there's no denying it's a text that unequivocally affirms human sexuality as one of God's many gifts for our delight, and one of the ways in which holy, divine love is meant to be shown and experienced in healthy, life-affirming relationships.

The recurring theme running throughout the Scriptures is that we have been created to be in relationship with God, and that God has created this world in such a way as for *all* of us to know divine love through all of creation, and through one another. Of our two scripture texts this morning, Song of Songs is all about the *aesthetic* nature of love. We experience desire and delight, beauty and longing all as manifestations of this fundamental reality of existence. We are loved by God: we are *beloved*. It is a wondrous and beautiful thing.

The rest of Scripture describes the countless other sorts of love we experience and are encouraged to learn and practice in ever deeper, ever more healthy and live-giving ways: love of parent, sister, brother, neighbour; love of the stranger, love of the outcast, love of the unlovable.

As those who are beloved of God, we are called to love the world; all of it. Not just those we're attracted to, not just family and friends and neighbour, but also the stranger, the outcast, the unlovable. Not just theoretically, either; not just passively thinking loving thoughts. We are called to love the world in action. To *be love*. This is the *ethical* nature of love. Insofar as we have been captivated by the love and life of Jesus Christ, who was himself love incarnate, you and I are invited to learn from him how to embody love, to *be love*, ourselves.

The writer of our Epistle lesson, James, was trying to help one of the earliest communities of Christian believers to wrap their heads around how that might look. Like Paul and other writers of the New Testament letters, James was writing with advice about how love in action behaves. "My dear brothers and sisters," he wrote, "take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires." Shake off all the worldly ways that will drag you down and distract you from practicing love.

One of the most crucial, but difficult, practices in any healthy relationship is listening. *Really* listening—because our tendency is to start thinking that we actually know the other person well enough to guess their thoughts. God knows (as do my husband and boys) I’m guilty of it. And when we don’t take time to listen carefully, we can get angry quickly—because we haven’t really sought to understand. Most of us are more eager to be understood. And that’s because the world teaches us that we ought to treat ourselves as #1; the ways of the world teach self-importance as the only way to fulfilment, whereas Jesus demonstrated that one can practice self-regard while also honouring the equally valuable selfhood of the other.

James goes on: “Don’t merely listen to the word... Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”

James was using the mirror image as a metaphor for those of us who, hearing the Gospel—“the perfect law that gives freedom”, we recognize our imperfect selves reflected in what’s said. We’re compelled by it, and know that we want to change; the person we are is not the fulfilled, integrated person we want to be. But as soon as we leave church, or the company of others whose faith and life inspire and challenge us to be more faithful and pure, we get distracted with other things. We promptly give up actively trying to change the things we didn’t like about what we saw. We might think about it again as we drift off to sleep at night, as we number our regrets about the day, and promise ourselves that tomorrow will be better. But the next day dawns and we start all over again finding ways not to do what our best intentions would have us do.

How carefully do we listen—to others, and to ourselves? To others—family members, neighbors, colleagues, complete strangers, the plight of desperate people we only see images of in faraway places? The concluding advice in the passage we read this morning is this: “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God . . . accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

Orphans and widows in James’s day were considered the most vulnerable and abandoned by the world. Today, they might be Syrian refugees or desperate migrants from any number of war-torn countries trying simply to survive. They might be the children and women trafficked for the sex trade. They might be someone you know personally, experiencing a sense of abandonment by the world, even by God; a suspicion that they don’t deserve the dignity of treatment as an equally-beloved child of God. Are we listening? Furthermore, after listening and hearing, are we actively responding in love?

How carefully do we listen to our own fears and convictions and hopes for a deeper, more meaningful life? And how attentively do we try to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world?

These are hard questions. The life of faith is not an easy one! But it is a deeply satisfying, fulfilling one because it is fully engaged with the stuff of love: it's a life that embraces both the aesthetic and the ethical in equal measure. Christian faith recognizes that God embraces us and loves us passionately in all of our humanity, and God equips us to love others in active and meaningful ways.

Thank God for the amazing grace we enjoy in life to keep trying, to keep starting over. Thank God for the wondrous gifts of beauty and sensuality, of longing and of delight, of desire and fulfilment—all these things that reveal and make visible and tangible God's love for this world, and particularly for humankind. Thank God for the truth that spells itself out over and over in so many ways across the pages of Scripture: you are loved. And for the challenge that gives meaning to our lives: Beloved, *be love*. Amen.