

“The Seal of Love”
Song of Solomon 8:6-7/John 6:25-27

In continuing this series on missing Biblical books from my preaching career, we arrive today at the most unusual one of the thirteen. Song of Solomon, or as other translations call that Old Testament work, “Song of Songs,” is unique in several ways. It is one of only two books in the entirety of Scripture--Esther being the other--where God is not spoken of at all. At least in that other work we are told the title character is at risk because of her faith and events in those pages tell the origin of the Jewish festival of Purim, too. Yet Song of Solomon contains no mention of the Divine One or any of Israel’s faith traditions or God’s saving acts. It is the only Biblical book, too, where a female voice predominates. There are 92 verses over its pages with an alternating male and female speaker, but the woman offers over half of them.

Yet the most notable characteristic of Song of Solomon and the likely reason I have not previously delivered a sermon from it is that the book consists of the Bible’s only love poem. I have used today’s reading in wedding homilies over the years, but never on a Sunday morning as this setting is completely different from one where all have gathered because of a decision based on love. One doesn’t have to read many of the verses that precede or follow our text to get a flavor for its intimate tone, too, as it feels like the reader has been given access to love letters where a woman and man express their passion for the other. It is not written with Victorian decorum either for when the man speaks, he describes his beloved’s body with words that are at best rated PG-13 and when the woman is heard, often with short vignettes, she, too, is clear and direct in her longings. Old Testament scholar Renita Weems says of the dominant voice in this book “unlike many of the women in the Bible, she is assertive, uninhibited and unabashed about her sexual desires.” (Weems, Renita. “Song of Songs,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume V*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, p. 364). Hearing that, some of you may wish that of the 66 books of the Bible that I would retire having preached on 65 of them, but I promised!

Given its uniqueness in Scripture, though, one might ask how it became part of the Bible. The simply answer is that we aren’t told. Some have suggested it was included because the book is attributed to Solomon, the king of Israel who was revered for his wisdom and building of the Temple. Others note that lyric poetry was a widely-accepted form of literature in that era and normal for inclusion in sacred writings. We can’t know with certainty, but the most convincing theory to me was that it serves as a predominantly female counterpoint to the male voice of Ecclesiastes, the book that precedes it in the Old Testament. Whatever the reason for inclusion, I trust, as Paul proclaims in his letter to Timothy that “All scripture is inspired by God.” (2 Timothy 3:16a). Thus, we turn to the words before us, seeking insight once more for our lives.

Our reading fits the book’s overall tone as the woman writes “Love is as strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire,” she continues “a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.” The woman is talking about human passion; the kind of emotion that can be found still between two people and the subject of literature, art, and music throughout time, and since the twentieth century, in film and television. Whether or not you have experienced that kind of passion in your own life most of us could name others we have known whose actions revealed the range of emotion she describes; a relationship marked by both love and drama, joy and heartbreak, creativity and destruction. The intensity of her words ring true.

Yet given that her bold descriptions are part of Scripture and don’t seem to be a natural fit for a house of worship, some interpreters over the centuries have tried to suggest that they are

meant only as analogy for the love God has for humankind or the love Jesus has for the church. Certainly, there are times when the same words in the Bible can lead to both literal and symbolic lessons yet it seems clear to me that the woman here is talking about the physical passion and longing that can occur between two people.

Thus, as I began working with the text, I sought a New Testament passage that could add to her message. The closest I found was in another of Paul's letters where he talks about the physical intimacy between a married couple and says that widowed or otherwise single persons should not marry. (1 Corinthians 7:8-9) He offered that counsel because he expected Jesus to return any day and wanted persons to focus on getting ready, but went on to say that if people were unable to control themselves that "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion." Such advice could explain why Paul never married himself and why I have never preached on that text either. I'm not starting today either, but instead kept looking! I then recalled the opening to this passage that to my hearing is not limited to the physical passion of a couple.

As just before talking about the power of love with its potential for good or harm, she says this "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arms, for love is strong as death." In those words, she names a different kind of longing; wanting some ongoing sign of love. That desire is true for married and single ones and echoes the sentiment we heard from Jesus as well.

His words came from a day after he fed 5000 people with a few fish and loaves of bread. When that dramatic event concluded, Jesus withdrew to the mountains by himself while the disciples set out across the Sea of Galilee. A storm arose and those terrified disciples suddenly saw Jesus walking toward them atop the water. Just as they were about to take him into the boat, they reached land. The next day, the crowd tracked him down. It is then that our text begins.

"When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?'" Jesus knows they were looking for him not because they understand who he is, but because they are hungry again, so just before he identifies himself as the Bread of Life, he adds, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

There it is again; that mention of a seal. For Jesus, the seal seems to refer to evidence that the divine love is at work in and through him as demonstrated so powerfully in the words and signs of his ministry. For the woman pouring out her heart centuries earlier, the seal sought from her beloved could have been a ring or necklace or a bracelet. The particulars are different, but both accounts speak of a seal revealed in deeds. Let me share two accounts that kind of response.

On Father's Day ten years ago, a couple of celebrities were sitting on the front row of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. They weren't movie stars or politicians, but a retired nurse's aide and a retired ice truck deliveryman named Elizabeth and Jack Holly who that fall would celebrate their 74th wedding anniversary. Not only did those 94 years old have an impressive marital track record, but their offspring did as well for their son William had just celebrated his 50th anniversary and their daughter Anna achieved her 27th. A couple of grandchildren were about to celebrate their 25th and 26th anniversary, too.

All of them were present at the National Shrine that day for its "Jubilarian Mass," which honored 600 couples who were celebrating 25 or more years of marriage, including 11 couples who had passed the threshold of 70 years. The Hollys took the prize for the longest union. A reporter asked them how they met. "Daggone, I don't remember," Jack said. "It was different times." Elizabeth doesn't recall either. Yet when asked the secret to a 74-year-old union, Mrs. Holly was clear. "It's never gotten difficult with me," she told *The Washington Post*. "We kept busy. You get home. You make supper. You go to bed. We weren't rich people. All you got to do

is act right. Be right. It ain't hard." (Shapira, Ian, "Md. Couple's Marriage Has Stood Test of Time, If Not Memory," *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2013) Sounds like a seal to me.

I also read a delightful article four years ago about three friends who grew up in the same town of Auburn, Maine. All of them are named Dorothy and each celebrated their 100th birthday in 2019. Those century-long friends call themselves "the three Dots."

Dorothy Kern worked as a reporter for the *Lewiston Sun Journal*. When World War II ended, she had the thrill of announcing it in a giant headline on the newspaper's office window facing the street. She went on to become a librarian at the local high school. Dot Buchanan worked as an executive secretary for the American Red Cross remembers the sound of teletype ticking off war casualties, always fearful it could include the name of her husband or someone else she knew. She went on to work as an accountant. Dot Murray recalls a fondness for Depression-era pickle sandwiches. She worked as a secretary and helped her husband run his business. She turned 100 first and the mayor presented her with a key to the city. "I thought it was kind of a big thing," Murray said. "But Dot Buchanan says it doesn't open anything!"

When the three Dots get together they always ask each other the same question "How are you feeling?" All said that their primary concern is that they don't want to be a burden on their families, too. As for advice to the rest of us, they had a few thoughts. Dot Kern's wish is that everyone would slow down, pay attention to the planet and deal with climate change. Dot Buchanan yearns for tolerance. "Accept other people for what they are," she says. "Because everybody's not alike. Everybody's not like me or like you." Dot Murray voiced her concern about polarizing political views in our land and advised. "Get along. Love one another." And glancing at Dot Buchanan's little dog, Jody, resting on the living room floor, added "You know, everyone should have a dog." (Sharon, Susan "For These 'Three Dots,' 100 Years of Friendship, Fellowship And Fun." www.npr.com, December 22, 2019)

"Set me as a seal," a woman of long ago asked and centuries later Jesus said, "It is on [me] that the God the Father has set his seal." Both reveal that for us, too, whether married or not, and whether speaking of the passion of lovers or the gentle spirit between long-time friends, the best evidence of love continues to be those daily acts that confirm the bond. Or as another wise woman put it: "All you go to do is act right. Be right. It ain't hard."