

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

September 2, 2018  
22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Song of Solomon 2:8-13

### God's Beauty Parlor

Hear now the Song of Solomon that in this passage conveys the voice of a young shepherd woman deeply in love.

*[read Song of Solomon 2:8-13]*

Pastor and scholar Eugene Peterson writes in his introduction to this biblical book, the Song of Solomon, also known as the Song of Songs, "We don't read very far in the Song of Songs before we realize two things: one, it contains exquisite love lyrics, and two, it is very explicit sexually. The Song, in other words, makes a connection between conjugal love and sex—a very important and very biblical connection to make." (*The Message*, © 2002, p. 1182)

It can come as a surprise to casual students of the Bible as well as to those who have read a lot of the scriptures that there is tucked in between the much more massive and oft quoted books of Psalms and Isaiah this little book that is all poetry celebrating the beauty of love between people. And again, as Peterson says poetry that is very explicit sexually.

For anyone who takes on the challenge of reading the Bible from cover to cover, starting with the first chapter of Genesis, and reading until the last chapter of Revelation, will find the encounter with the Song of Solomon as quite a change of pace. From the powerful words of the psalms of praise and psalms of lament as well as the teachings of the Proverbs which can be mysterious and heavy and then into the authoritative witness of Isaiah the prophet, these words of beauty and amorous love can catch the reader by surprise. Its lilting beauty and winsome poetry are a relief as well as a much needed reminder that in and among the heavy seriousness of God's word comes this little snippet celebrating the love that we share.

The book begins with these words, "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's. Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is perfume poured out; therefore the maidens love you." (Song. 1:1-3)

Here are some other selected verses:

"Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves." (1:15)

"How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved. Your lips are like crimson thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. Your neck is like the tower of David, built in courses; on it hangs a thousand bucklers all of which shield warriors." (4:1-4)

It is poetically descriptive words like these that prompted biblical professor Stephen D. Moore to describe this as one of several sections of the Bible that constitute God's beauty parlor. (*God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) To think of this as part of God's beauty parlor is a helpful image to remind us that in creating us,

God fully intended that we engage and revel in life in ways that are beautiful as well as in other more typically religious ways such as adoration and reverence and obedience.

In fact, if we look at our earliest origins as described at the very beginning of the Bible, we discover this intention of God in how the story of God's creating humans is described in the second chapter of Genesis. It's in this second creation account that we encounter a more narrative story of how human beings came to be, first by God creating a single, genderless human being and then moving to the much needed interrelatedness that characterizes what it means to be human. I'm reading from the Common English Bible here:

"The Lord God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life's breath into his nostrils. The human came to life. The Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east and put there the human he had formed." (Gen. 2:7-8)

And then after creating the Garden of Eden in which this first human is placed, we read,

"Then the Lord God said, 'It's not good that the human is alone. I will make him a helper that is perfect for him.' So the Lord God formed from the fertile land all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky and brought them to the human to see what he would name them. The human gave each living being its name. The human named all the livestock, all the birds in the sky, and all the wild animals. But a helper perfect for him was nowhere to be found. So the Lord God put the human into a deep and heavy sleep, and took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh over it. With the rib taken from the human, the Lord God fashioned a woman and brought her to the human being." (Gen. 2:18-22)

While this part of the creation story serves to provide explanation as to how there came to be two genders—male and female, there is something much deeper here as well. It's in these key words of God, "It's not good that the human is alone."

While our initial response to this declaration that it is not good that the human is alone may be to shrug our shoulders and say "yeah, of course." Yeah, of course it is not good for a person to be alone. In fact anyone who has studied human behavior in the fields of psychology and sociology know that in order to live healthy and productive lives, humans must be in meaningful relationships with other humans. It's not enough to have a dog that you love and that loves you. It's not enough to have all the basic necessities of life without meaningful interaction with and relationship to others.

Somehow along the way though in the development of the Christian tradition, there was a move away from celebrating this interrelatedness with one another outside the constraints of private behavior within the confines of marriage. And even that kind of behavior became a topic off limits for polite and proper conversation, let alone conversation within the church. The Victorian propriety of a particular culture and time took root within large parts of the Christian community around the world and in many ways has lingered into our day .

Our encounter with the Song of Solomon this morning is an opportunity for us to be reminded that God has understood right from the get go that for us to be healthy, happy, and productive, as well as procreative, we must be in deeply meaningful loving relationships that transcend the superficial.

In a parenthetical way, it's worth noting in the cycle in which Bible passages are assigned for reading on a particular Sunday, there is only one Sunday in the entire 3-year cycle that includes a

reading from the Song of Solomon. That Sunday is today. The Victorian propriety perhaps has gotten the best of those who developed the lectionary in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Starting next week, we will once again, in our Sunday worship for the next nine months, be departing from this customary lectionary and will be developing our worship and preaching themes around the very large theme of love. For those who were with us last year, we had an overall focus on the theme of call. As we wrapped up that focus last May, the leadership of our church has been pondering where that focus has led us as a congregation. What has emerged after a series of meetings, and lots of conversation, is a focus on “learning and living God’s love, together.” My sharing this with you is a sneak peek for those who made it to church on this Labor Day weekend, the unofficial end of the summer.

While we’re still in the early stages of working out our own lectionary for this focus, I fully expect that we’re going to hear more from this wonderful book of the Song of Solomon with its sharp focus on human love.

Of the many intriguing features of this biblical book is that at no point in its 8 chapters is God mentioned or even referenced. This may seem an oversight to some. But to others the fact that this book is a celebration of the beauty and richness of human love, one for another, is in itself a testimony to the loving interrelatedness that God intends for all in the human family—again as is made clear in the creation story.

One need not look too far and wide today to see how desperately in need our world is for attention on love. There is so much emphasis in recent years on that which divides and separates us from one another. Whether it be racial identity, national origin, geographical location, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, educational status, political affiliation, or any other manner of segmenting, there seems to be much more attention paid to keeping us apart from one another rather than focusing on what we have in common and that around which we can coalesce.

Love is a theme that permeates the Bible, and consequently it is to permeate our lives as well. So rich is this theme that there are multiple words in the original biblical languages that are all translated into the single word, “love,” in the English language. So when we see the word love and read of it in the Bible, it is not always clear what is its basic and fundamental root meaning.

When it comes to the Song of Solomon, while there are multiple layers of meaning to its beautiful poetry, there can be no doubt that the human to human love that we celebrate in loving committed relationships is surely a principle and overriding understanding of this special little book.

May we find delight and joy as we read these poetic verses that are a full-throated celebration of one of the central joys of human living as intended by our creator God who knows that it is not good for us to be alone. Let’s plan to spend more time in God’s beauty parlor.

In just a few moments we will be gathering around the table of our Lord and savior Jesus as we celebrate again the deep love that God has for us. So deep is that love that Jesus, God’s son, was sent that we be made fully alive in this life and in the life to come.

Come, then, to this table of love and give thanks to God for this amazing gift of love.