

“Love as Solidarity”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 12, 2020

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 66:10-14a

Rev. John Wahl

Song of Songs 5:2-9

As one of *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*, the Songs of Songs is often overlooked or ignored by Christian readers of scripture. This week, we continue to look at this work of poetry that portrays the love blossoming between a young man and young woman as they explore and discover one another. Throughout the book, these two lovers speak and respond to each other admiringly, playfully and respectfully.

As we discussed last week, Song of Songs has often been read as an allegory: a tale that has two different meanings. Not only does it describe two young people discovering love, but also the relationship of a loving God and humanity; or – for Christians, specifically – between Jesus and the church. In this reading, God sees each of us as beautiful, longs to be with us, and will search unceasingly to find us.

Today’s passage, from chapter five, begins innocently enough, with the young woman in bed late at night as she is drifting off to sleep. Suddenly, her lover knocks on the door, seeking to be let in. After an initial moment of hesitation, she goes to open the door but, by then, he has already disappeared into the night. Lovesick, filled with longing, she wanders out to find him.

Once out in the street, surrounded by darkness, she encounters the night watchmen. For just a moment, we get the sense that everything is going to be fine; she has been found by those sworn to protect the city. But in a shocking scene, the young woman is beaten and stripped by these keepers of the law. Just moments before, she was flirting with her lover, but now she is an injured survivor of assault.

Sometimes, this whole sequence of events is interpreted as nothing more than a dream. The young woman, alone at night and in bed, says “I was asleep but my heart was awake.” She hears a knocking on her door, but could it have just been a figment of her imagination? As she wanted to be pursued, so her lover

appears to her in her dreams, but – as happens so often when sleeping – the fantasy is followed by a rude awakening. Her lover is not there; she is alone; her heart is sick, and she feels broken by disappointment.

It could have all been a dream; but – unfortunately – just as plausible is the jarring reality that such a thing could really happen. Whether partly or fully asleep, the young woman awakens to a knocking at her door. In her surprise, or maybe in an attempt to be alluring, she informs her visiting lover that she is already undressed, her feet already washed. But, instead of getting the hint, the young man outside takes her response literally and goes away, feeling rejected. Like so many people searching for love, their signals get crossed and when she finally opens the door, he has disappeared into the night.¹

But instead of closing the door and going back to bed, the young woman, feeling as if something has died within her, goes outside to look for her lover. She searches but cannot find him; she calls out but he doesn't answer. Her lover – and love itself – may have felt to her at the time not only elusive, but possibly gone forever; having disappeared into the night.

Maybe the watchmen mistake her for a woman of the night, dressed as she was, or perhaps they saw her as someone who needed to be reminded of her place. Whatever the case, they chose not to protect her, but felt entitled to control her – even if that meant assaulting her. In a book that celebrates the joy and beauty of human sexuality, this encounter reminds us that the world is often a dangerous place, especially for women, and sometimes even at the hands of the very men that are expected to protect them. At times, as we have seen in recent episodes of police brutality, the assault of human bodies is the result of keepers of order functioning as the defenders of the status quo. Instead of listening to and understanding the circumstances that brought this young woman out of her house at night, the city watchmen assumed they knew who she was and what needed to be done to assert order.²

Feeling abandoned by her lover and having been harmed by those meant to protect her, the young woman reaches out to her friends – referred to as the Daughters of Jerusalem – who stay at her side in her time of need. “How is your lover different from any other lover?” they ask. In other words, *is he really worth all this?* They remind their friend of her own inherent worth outside of her

¹ Renita Weems, *New Interpreters' Bible Commentary*, vol. 5

² Robert Williamson, Jr., “Solidarity in Song of Songs”

relationships with men. *Lovers will come and go, they seem to say, but you in yourself are valuable.*

The Daughters of Jerusalem show their young friend what love really means. They have been listening and watching as this relationship bloomed between the two young lovers, but they are unconvinced that her fantasy will become reality. Real love – sisterhood, solidarity, what today we call being an ally – means standing alongside, but also building up; encouraging friends to have the wisdom and good judgment to understand what – and who – is really worth it.

In Song of Songs, the young woman will go on to tell – and show – her friends that she believes her lover is worth it; that he is devoted to her, that he respects her, that he wants the best for her. Thankfully, we can be in solidarity with one another in the midst of our own discerning moments and – if necessary – in defiance to structures of power that would threaten or harm us. Left alone – like the young woman in the night – we are more vulnerable; but together – with a shared purpose and spirit – we are stronger and more resilient.

For those who choose to read Song of Songs as an allegory, traditionally it is the male character – the one who knocks at the door but leaves before it is answered – that is seen as God. That leaves humans in the role of the female who responds after hesitating, then gets attacked and injured while out searching. At times, this seems to accurately describe our relationship with God: we look but cannot find; we take risks and sometimes get burned; and those precious moments of nearness to God we do have will not last forever.

But what if, in our allegorical reading, we allow God to be the female character; the one taking the risk to pursue us; willing to follow us even into dangerous places, while – instead – we are the fickle ones: we might stand at the door and knock but are easily discouraged; when the answer we get isn't the one we wanted to hear, we turn on our heels and walk away.³

In this relationship – between humans and the divine, between Christ and the church – there is passion and longing, joy and wonder, disappointment and loss. While it sometimes can feel as if God has abandoned us, there are also times when God is revealed to us as so infinitely patient with us that we can be found anywhere we go; and that we're never alone, but can find solidarity with fellow

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr., *Bibleworm Podcast*

seekers of justice and peace who will risk accompanying us even if we've been beaten and stripped and left in the streets.

In times of uncertainty and chaos – like those that we are experiencing now – there is the temptation to look for and hold on to easy answers. Scripture passages such as this one, though, invite us to consider multiple interpretations and meanings. They open up possibilities rather than simply spelling things out. They offer images of both intimacy and abandonment; safety and risk; violence and comfort. Still, through all of these different emotions and experiences, we can find solidarity in and with those who would stand alongside us, strengthen us, and encourage us to discern and choose wisely.

And as followers of Christ, we read this text through the lens of Jesus who himself bore our sins and the sin of the world; freeing us from our burdens in order that we might freely serve in solidarity with others: to be their allies in times of need; to bear up their wounds and repair their torn garments; to call for justice and help discover sanctuary and peace. We are disciples to the one who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one that was lost; who turns the entire house upside down to find one coin that was misplaced; and who calls for a celebration when they are found. And so, in this moment in time when the odds can seem long and the cause nearly lost, we are God's people called upon to be persistent, to stand faithfully, to fervently hold on to hope; if not for ourselves, then for those who need the solidarity of our love. Amen.