

“Beautifully Made”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 5, 2020

5th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-17

Rev. John Wahl

Song of Songs 1:15-2:2 and 2:8-14

This morning, we turn to the third of five *Forgotten Books of the Bible*; these texts from the Old Testament that – while they are integral parts of celebrating annual festivals in Judaism – are generally overlooked in the Christian faith. Song of Songs is a series of poems offered back and forth between two young lovers who are longing and searching for one another; celebrating the beauty of their love for one another using language that is often sweet, sometimes clumsy, and for many in the church, embarrassingly erotic.

Maybe it is no surprise, then, that from nearly the beginning of Christianity, Song of Songs has been read not for what it seems to be – a poem celebrating the beauty of embodied, human love – but as a story with a second/hidden meaning; an allegory about the divine love of God for Israel and Jesus for the church.

Traditionally, Song of Songs has been attributed to King Solomon from the 10th Century BC – written when he was a young man. But most scholars view it instead as a collection of poems written by one or more different authors which later came to be associated with Solomon because of his reputation as a writer and lover of women; created in the spirit of Solomon rather than by the king himself.¹

This is also one of only two biblical books – Esther being the other – where there is no mention of God. The words are spoken to, by, and about a young man and a young woman – with a chorus that periodically comments on what is happening between the two lovers. Unlike most books in scripture, the woman’s voice is clearly heard; in the intimacy and anticipation of her lover, she speaks nearly 75 percent of the time. In English, it can be difficult to distinguish the voices; but in Hebrew nouns and pronouns and their adjectives and verbs are gendered and numbered for individual and collective male and female voices, making it possible to easily identify the speaker and the addressee.

¹ Robert Williamson, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*

So, in today's reading, the voice of the young man begins, saying: "Look at you – so beautiful, my dearest! Look at you – so beautiful! Your eyes are doves!" Immediately, the voice of the woman responds: "Look at you – so beautiful, my love." This back and forth continues throughout Song of Songs with poems both short and long – mutually affirming declarations of beauty and love. They take turns describing each other's eyes, hair, neck, and belly (among other body parts) – comparing them to various flowers, trees, and animals; from lilies to roses, fig to cedar, stags and gazelles. Their words are suggestive but not explicit; appreciative without objectifying; admiring while never diminishing.

This series of poems is about the joys of human intimacy and painful longing when apart. Beginning with verse 8, we hear the young woman's voice as she reminisces on and anticipates love. Neither shy nor reticent, the onset of spring stirs her desire for the one who loves her; the frequent references to the natural world are an indication that she understands love to be in total agreement with the goodness of God's creation. The garden setting may well intentionally evoke the Garden of Eden, where woman and man are in harmony with one another and nature around them; where the brokenness of relationships among humans and between humans and the earth are healed. Beauty is to be appreciated and consensual love celebrated.²

This serves as a reminder that our physical bodies are beautifully made, and that loving relationships occur within and not in spite of human bodies. The way that young woman and man describe one another is not based on any conventional norms: she is beautiful to him, as he is to her. She loves every part of him from head to foot; she loves the ways he moves and how he stands still; and he is smitten with every little thing she does. Their desire for one another is at the same time exciting and affirming.

And so, if we were to read these poems as an allegory for the relationship between God and God's people, it would seem that the one who watches for the coming of her lover – patiently and longingly waiting – would represent the way that we long to be in God's presence; to sit under the canopy of the shade together; to be held safely in the arms of the divine. Thus, in the same way that we can lovingly admire the beauty of the created bodily form, we can also appreciate the ways that we are all beloved by God: not just parts of us, but all of us – from head to toe.

² Wil Gafney from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Of course, we live in a society that does not always allow for healthy appreciation of the human body. We are bombarded with examples of people – usually women and girls – being objectified in unhealthy and sometimes dangerous ways. There is a line – sometimes it’s more subtle than others – between what is consenting and affirming and what is exploitative and harmful. From body shaming to sexual assault to pornography to human trafficking, our society has a myriad of problems with accepting and promoting beauty of the human form. We need to hear voices such as these in Song of Songs that remind us of what true love can and should be.

The church has too often responded to these societal issues with silence; unable or just too uncomfortable to discuss the topics of beauty and human sexuality. Thus, while our culture has become hyper-sexualized, in congregations, these subjects are considered off-limits. How refreshing it is to look at scripture and find voices – and predominantly a female voice – that can innocently and honestly talk about beauty, desire, and love.³

And how important it can be to remember that today’s beauty standards are not timeless but culturally conditioned. Thus, all of the voices that we hear telling us that we need to look a certain way: to have fewer wrinkles or trendier clothes or thicker hair are momentary snapshots in time; in other eras different looks and tastes were considered the norm. Thus there is not one ideal for beauty, but it is truly in the eye of the beholder.

Song of Songs is also an ode to the beauty of creation: the poems focus often on plentiful vineyards, fields, and gardens. Twenty-four plant varieties are specifically named, from trees to wildflowers to exotic spices. To read the Song is to be invited to experience the beauty of a lush and fertile landscape; to recognize the wonders of this creation, which can’t help but lead to pondering the source of all that created beauty.⁴

Therefore, although God’s name is never mentioned in Song of Songs, the themes of love and beauty strongly evoke the love of God for all of creation; and thus, the ways that we respond by appreciating beauty and returning love. There is, indeed, a fine line between love that is open and genuine and that which excludes and demeans. At this moment in history, on this particular 4th of July weekend – when our eyes are being opened to see how partial and unjust many of our nation’s systems and policies have historically been toward black and

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

⁴ Elaine James from *WorkingPreacher.com*

indigenous people of color – we may need to reassess the way we have embraced the beautiful diversity of God’s creation. While the calls for justice and recompense may cause us to feel uncomfortable, now is a time for us to allow those voices long-silenced to be heard; to remember that what is considered to be beautiful is culturally conditioned; to recall that the beauty and sanctity of our shared humanity has greater value than any idol we might erect or worship.

Some brave couples have selected this text from Song of Songs to be read during their wedding ceremonies; practically daring their designee to read about *the lover leaping upon the mountains like a gazelle* without getting red in the face. But the excited anticipation of love to be discovered in this text is real; whether that is the love between two people on the verge of their married life, or the love between God and God’s people. Both are expressions of love that is passionate and genuine: a vivid testimony of mutual longing and appreciation.

Let us be reminded, today, that though it can be sometimes be difficult to recognize in the world around us, God sees beauty in each one of us, and is longing to see our faces and hear the sound of our voices. Beauty – whether in the flowers of the field, or the sound of a songbird in the trees, or in the ideals of a nation founded on justice of, by and for the people, or in the bodily form of a man or woman – beauty has been given for us to enjoy; not to denigrate or to exploit, but to celebrate with an anticipation like the dawning of each new day. As the Psalmist says in today’s first reading, we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.” Let us give praise to the Lord who so loves us as to have made us this way. Amen.