

Hearts & Flowers

A Message for Worship on Sunday Morning
The Sunday preceding Ash Wednesday/Valentine's Day
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
February 11, 2018
Text: Song of Solomon 2:8-17

My choice to preach today on the steamy Song of Solomon is not a conventional one. In fact, the Song of Solomon only appears once in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary – the suggested list of biblical texts for study and reflection common to many mainline Christian churches. Even then, it is an alternate reading, meaning you have the option of skipping it entirely, in the first year of the three-year cycle. It falls in mid to late summer, depending on the denomination's placement of the text in their recommended ordering of the Lectionary. I was surprised by this until I started to research the text and then, it made sense. Nobody wants to go anywhere near this steamy text on a Sunday morning. I'm sure you could tell by just the few verses we read that this is indeed a love poem intended to evoke the physical passion two lovers have for each other. You can't help but wonder after you've read it, what it's doing in the Bible in the first place.

One of the commentary articles I read on this text was even entitled – “What in the world is this doing in the Bible?” Written by biblical scholar Kathryn Schifferdecker, this article explores the text and its history of inclusion in the canon of the Hebrew and

Christian Scriptures. She explains that it was a topic of much debate among rabbis in the first century who thought it must be an ancient drinking song! That is, they felt that way until one rabbi, Rabbi Akiba, said, “The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”

(Schifferdecker, *Working Preacher*, 2009). His strong statement saying essentially this text is so beautiful that it must be a sacred gift from God for the canon ended the debate right there.

Interestingly, the earliest Christian churches found much to preach about in this text because they saw it as an allegory for understanding the love God has for the people. This is still a common way of interpreting this text. It is an effective way of explaining that God’s love for God’s people is just as overwhelming, just as all consuming, as the passionate love two lovers feel for one another. Christians further extended the allegory to represent the love of Christ for the church founded in his name to carry on the work he entrusted to the disciples. The extent to which this allegory became a central tenet of Christianity can be found in our own hymnal sitting in the pew rack in front of you. Look at the words of “The Church’s One Foundation” on page 545. “From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride; with his own blood he bought her and for her life he died.”

Clearly the intent of these words is to describe the church as a woman with Christ as her bridegroom, their love so passionate that Christ was willing to die for her. Read through the other lyrics and you will see it is this passionate love for Christ that enables the church, envisioned as female, to endure all the hardships and challenges it has over the centuries. The final vision for the ending of this epic love story appears in verse 4, “Mid toil and tribulation and tumult of her war, she waits the consummation of peace forever more; till, with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest, and the great church victorious shall be the church at rest.” Powerful stuff, all tracing its way back to a very ancient love poem that never even mentions God by name.

The art world has been equally enamored of this particular allegory describing the powerful and passionate love of Jesus for his people. A famous sculpture by Bernini is entitled *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy* and is on display at one of the most famous churches in Rome, the Santa Maria Della Vittoria. It is an incredible sculpture showing the ecstasy of St. Theresa as she encounters an angel sent by God to respond to St. Theresa’s devotion to Christ. Theresa was a Discalced Carmelite nun who was a mystic. She devoted her life to prayer hoping to encounter the true nature of Christ’s love for the people. Her passionate encounter with the angel sent by God is the fruit of her prayers and is recounted vividly in her autobiography. Scandalous and even unnerving, the sculpture by

Bernini captures in a whole new way what it could mean to see God's love for God's people as an all-consuming romantic love.

But, as you might expect, not all scholars agree that this love poem is intended strictly as an allegory for God's love for the people. Several contemporary scholars, all of them women, see in the Song of Solomon, or the Song of Songs as it is sometimes called, an unfettered celebration of human love. The poem has no real plot, instead depicting a shifting montage of scenes in which the lovers are talking with and about each other. They are clearly extolling the wonders of being in love, of finding that one and only person who makes you feel fully and completely alive. These same scholars also are quick to point out that in the Song of Solomon the woman actually has voice more often than the man.

Furthermore, their conversation throughout the poem is one of equals talking with each other rather than the male ordering the female to behave in certain ways. This, dear friends, is quite extraordinary given that this text is at least 3000 years old. This text was written in a male dominated, patriarchal society and yet the woman has a strong voice, heard more often than the male's. That is simply extraordinary.

Another important feature of the romantic relationship described in this text in some detail is the fact that it is clearly a relationship based on mutual respect and absolute fidelity. These two people love each other, passionately and with a mutuality that

all of us in loving relationships strive to attain. These two lovers are completely faithful to each other. The passion described throughout this book is one of mutuality, of total devotion of the couple to each other. As such, it highlights a rarity too often overlooked and even discounted in the mass media of today. This beautiful poem is a testimony that passionate, romantic love is grounded in mutual respect for each other where infidelity and disrespect of any kind is simply unthinkable.

So, perhaps you can see why I chose this text to focus on this week as Valentine's Day looms ahead of us on Wednesday.

Technically this Sunday on the church calendar is supposed to focus on the event known as the Transfiguration – that moment when Jesus encounters Moses and Elijah on a mountaintop, witnessed by three of the disciples, Peter, James and John. It is called the Transfiguration because Jesus is transfigured or changed by the encounter, receiving divine support for the final weeks of his ministry as he resolutely makes his way toward Jerusalem. This is why Transfiguration Sunday always precedes the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday. But, honestly, there's only so much you can say about the Transfiguration. So, rather than create yet another sermon on a familiar topic, I thought it might be fun to take a look at something more appropriate for Valentine's Day. And what could be more appropriate for

Valentine's Day than this incredible, lyrical love poem we know as Song of Solomon.

This seems especially appropriate to me given the reality that Ash Wednesday this year indeed coincides with Valentine's Day. That just doesn't happen all that often and I didn't think this was a happenstance to be glossed over. Add to this is the reality that Valentine's Day is a significant holiday in this church as evidenced by the annual Valentine Tea taking place today. So, what can we glean from these overlapping holidays and the seemingly disparate views they embody. Ash Wednesday is about confessing one's sins and preparing to enter a time of self-reflection about one's relationship with God. Valentine's Day is about celebrating the vitally important role of love in our lives. Ash Wednesday is about, well, ashes. Valentine's Day is about hearts and flowers and candy and balloons. What could they possibly have in common?

We need look no further than the Song of Solomon for our answer. Their point of commonality is love – the love of God for God's people and the people's love of God *but also* the incomparable joy of the deep, abiding and passionate love one human can have for another. Love, dear friends, is the common thread connecting Ash Wednesday with Valentine's Day. On Ash Wednesday love for God expressed through confession, reflection and penance through the receiving of ashes takes center stage, the

only day of the Christian year where this is the case. Love for God is what causes us to bring our whole selves before God on Ash Wednesday and it is God's abiding and unconditional love for us we are reminded of in that moment when the ashes are received. On Valentine's Day we celebrate the incredible capacity of one human to love another completely. Such love is transforming and transfiguring for both parties in the romantic relationship when they are able to love each other selflessly because mutuality and fidelity form the foundation of the relationship.

This serendipitous accident of calendar this year which has Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday coinciding is to me proof positive that God is paying attention, close attention, to what is happening in our lives and in our world these days. God knows how desperately unconditional love is needed made manifest in mutual respect and fidelity to the basic Christian value that all people, *all people*, matter to God. God knows that we all need to pause in the midst of our frustrations about the ways so many things are unfolding in our lives these days. We need to pause and reflect on God, and how God is and is not part of our lives as God needs to be. We need to remember that we are not in this alone. We do not have to have all the answers to all the problems we encounter and witness each day. We do not need to be perfect. In fact, we need to remember that we are NOT perfect. We are deeply flawed, each one of us. We are too quick to set love aside

in favor of petty desires and disagreements. We are too quick to forget that God's unconditional love for us brings with it great responsibility – to love God with all that we are and all that we have and to love the other as much as we love ourselves.

So, this Ash Wednesday, I hope you will pause to consider all the ways love is alive and visible in your life and all the ways it isn't. Join us on Wednesday at 6:30 for the Ash Wednesday service as a time to reconsider God's love for you and your love for God and how that love makes possible all the other loving relationships in your life that you celebrate on Valentine's Day. And if you can't be here, please be somewhere quiet. Take out your bible and read something, like maybe the Song of Solomon. Think about love and the ways in which it is present – and absent – in your life. Then, decide what you can do to embody the love God has already given you, sharing it with the people you already know and love, but also with those for whom love is in short supply. Let this be your Lenten commitment this year. And let it transform your life. Amen.