

3-30-25 Sermon: “Love Is Strong as Death” – Song of Songs 8:6-7

We continue this morning on our Lenten journey through the Biblical wisdom literature. First, we read from the Book of Proverbs, which told us that wisdom is relationship, with God and one another. And last week we heard from the Book of Psalms that wisdom is time spent in the presence of God.

This week, we are looking for wisdom in the pages of the Song of Songs.

And y’all...the Song of Songs is a *fascinating* book! It contains no prayers, no stories, no prophecies – no references to God, or faith, or anything religious. It is simply 8 chapters of poetry about love and sex.

From many years of working in youth ministry, I can tell you this: if you leave a middle schooler alone with the Bible long enough, they *will* find this book. And suddenly, lo and behold, they will be *enraptured* with Scripture!

And they will come to you and point out some choice verses, maybe Song of Songs chapter 4, verses 4-5, where the man sings to his lover: “Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies. Until the day breathes and the shadows flee, I will *hasten* to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense.”

And they will say to you, “Pastor Ginna, did you know *this* was in the Bible?” And you will say, “The Word of the Lord,” and they *will* say, “Thanks be to God!”

Teenagers are not the only ones who are fascinated by this book. Of all 66 books of the Bible, the Song of Songs is #3 on the list of which books have generated the most commentaries, surpassed only by Genesis and Psalms. There is something about this book – perhaps its very novelty – that draws Jews and Christians, time and time again, back to its pages.

Christians tend to read Song of Songs one of two ways. The traditional reading, popular especially in the Middle Ages, sees this poetry as a love song between Christ and the Church. This reading is allegorical, metaphorical – a song of spiritual love and desire between the Creator and the created.

More recently, modern interpreters have said, “You know, if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it just might be a duck. This book of love and sex poetry...well, it might be poetry about love and sex.” And as such it becomes a hallowing of love and sex, a reminder that it is God who created our bodies – sexuality included – and God who called it good for us to live in close and intimate relationships with one another.

All right, Ginna, you say. Enough with the birds and the bees. How on earth is this stuff considered “wisdom literature?”

That brings us to our second reading, from chapter 8, verses 6-7. The woman says to her lover, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm: for love is strong death. Many waters cannot quench love; neither can the floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of their house, it would be utterly scorned.”

Most scholars agree that these verses are the original conclusion to the book – everything else was tacked on afterward.

But friends, here is where we get into the question of wisdom, because here the author brings in a perennial human problem – death.

Wisdom literature loves to solve a problem. In Proverbs, the problem is ignorance; in Psalms, the problem is the success of the wicked. Here in the Song of Songs, we encounter the ultimate problem – death – the inescapable fact that human beings do not endure. We are dust, and to dust we shall return.

We church people are unfortunately good at denial of death. We immediately jump to resurrection, to promises of a future heavenly reunion so we don't have to feel the depth of our grief, to acknowledge the finality of our loss. Our culture increasingly refers to funerals as "celebrations of life," a euphemism that tries to keep us from lingering too long on this business of death. It's as if we're afraid that if we think too long about the death of a loved one, we'll remember that we are going to die, too.

But death is the *only* guarantee. Those who are wise know this. And yet.

And yet. There is something, the Song of Songs claims, that is as strong as death, perhaps stronger. There is *one thing* that endures, even beyond the grave. And that something is love.

Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis points out that, though we like to separate them, love and death have several things in common. They are both all-consuming. They are both utterly irresistible. They are the only two forces on this earth that have the power to get us outside of ourselves. Do you know that word – ecstasy, that we use to describe this kind of sexual love – the Greek literally means "standing outside of oneself."¹

Love and death both have the power to consume us. But the one who has been consumed by love can never be entirely consumed by death.

The Song of Songs uses the imagery of sex to convey this love of an all-consuming nature, but of course, that's not the only kind of love that can consume us. Remember, for centuries, this book has been interpreted as a poem about the relationship between Christ and the church, God and God's people, Creator and creature. And that love is not sexual, but it is...intimate.

Intimacy. *That* is the key to this death-defying love. *That* is the Song of Songs' answer to the question: What is wisdom?

Wisdom, the Song of Songs tells us, is intimacy. Intimacy with God and with one another. Love that is up close and personal. The kind of love we share with our partners, our parents, our children, our closest friends and loved ones. Intimacy is the kind of love that can see the tears glimmering in your eyes and can smell the coffee on your breath. The kind of love that changes a diaper or gives you a bath in the hospital or nursing home.

It is the intimacy that both intrigues us and embarrasses us when we read the Song of Songs, and it turns out, that is entirely the point! Because for those of us who worship the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, "genuine intimacy brings us into contact with the sacred. Intimacy is the means through which human life is sanctified."²

God loves us, Scripture teaches, with a love that is not afraid to get close. Wisdom is sharing that same kind of love with one another.

In John's Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." And right before he does this, he sits down and washes each of their feet.

The gesture is intimate. It makes the disciples uncomfortable. But that is the kind of love that is strong as death.

May we go and do likewise. Amen.

¹ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2000) p. 297.

² Ibid p. 235.