

“Your Love Keeps Lifting Me Higher”

February 12, 2017

Loving Large series – Valentine’s Day and Hearts for Missions

NOTE: Portions of this sermon are taken from “Loving Large” by Jacob Armstrong. I’ve adapted this series for use at Lake Harbor UMC.

Love songs are nothing new. They’ve been around as long as there’s been language. If you turn on the radio, it’s not hard to find a love song: new love, disappointed love, grateful love, crazy love. Love songs express how we feel when we’re in love. Maybe you’ve heard that song we sang today - “Your Love Keeps Lifting Me Higher.” Maybe you remember more recent ones like “I Will Always Love You” or “My Heart Will Go On.”

Usually, love songs are over the top. They’re heavy on romantic love, but they don’t go into the cost of love very much or the daily work of commitment. Tuesday is Valentine’s Day, and one statistic I found said that Americans spent over \$19 billion in 2016 to celebrate. Between cards, flowers, chocolate, jewelry, or a new car with a bow, we spend a lot to express our love to one another!

But we do it because of how we feel. We want to express what’s inside of us - the condition of our heart for the one we love. And it’s difficult to express all that we feel. To try to put into words how we feel is impossible. Words fall short and don’t even begin to grasp the depth of our love. In the heart of someone considering his or her beloved, the biggest box of chocolates or a car with a bow can’t express what’s happening inside. That’s why we have poetry and songs that are sappy and over the top - so that we can try to express what’s happening in us.

If you’ve read Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon), you know that it’s a love song. It’s older than anything we’ve heard on the radio, and yet we can hear the passion and longing and romantic love. And just to warn you, the rating would probably be more than PG these days! Here are some of the words: “But then I held him and would not let him go.” (3:4b) “How beautiful you are and how pleasing, O love with your delights!” (7:6) in addition to the words we read today from chapter 8:

Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame.
Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away.
If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love,
it would be utterly scorned.

It was probably written in the 920s BC, more than 3000 years ago - some believe by a man named Solomon who wrote a song for his beloved. Others say it was written after Solomon. I’ll leave you to read it for yourself. It’s a very expressive, honest look at

romantic love. It's a reminder that all that God created is good - that sexuality is a good gift of God to be celebrated in commitment and faithfulness.

How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh how beautiful!
Your eyes behind your veil are doves,
your hair is like a flock of goats,
your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,
coming up from the washing" (4:1-2).

It's right after Ecclesiastes, which talks about the meaning of life, and right before the prophet Isaiah. This is a song between two lovers. There's no reference to God or Messiah. Again, I encourage you to read it for yourself. It's personal. It's a glimpse into love letters and intimate conversation. Some of the imagery is strange ("your teeth are like that of the goats"), and some of it is explicit. So why is it included?

Some scholars believe that it's an allegory - a way to explain God's love for us. God is saying that kind of over-the-top love—that makes you say and do crazy things, the kind of love that is as strong as death, that's jealous, that burns like a blazing fire, that waters can't quench, that would make a great king like Solomon say something like "Your hair is like a flock of goats"—that kind of love is the way God loves you and me.

I'm not sure many of us think of God's love that way, but what if we did? If we start to believe that God loves us in the radical, I'll-do-anything type of love that a head over heels lovers have for each other, then we might think differently about God and ourselves – and each other.

Let's be honest: some of us sitting here aren't sure if God even likes us – let alone loves us! Some of us have great doubts that God would ever come close to us, because of where we've been or what we've done. When we start to believe that God loves us in a pursuing love kind of way, we will never be the same.

Last week we talked about how our world seems to be in great trouble and seems to run on power, greed, fear, and the like. We talked about how we're distracted by our own stuff instead of focused on loving God. We started to consider what it would look like if we were loving large - how the love of Jesus in our lives helps us to change the world.

Remember the #1 thing: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul. Love your neighbor as yourself.* We start with loving God as we try to change our world, and our challenge was to spend five minutes a day not producing or doing anything or checking anything off the list, but finding time each day when we were intentional in loving God.

This week we're moving toward how that love for God leads to loving others. God has an excessive, over-the-top love for us, so how should this affect the way we love others? Let's frame it with three questions:

What does this mean in terms of God's love for me?

What does it mean in terms of my love for God?

How does this affect my love for others?

That's the basic progression that God gives us: We first understand God's love. Then we offer our love to God. This affects how we love others.

We read today: "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm." A seal is the official symbol or sign that something belongs to something else. It signifies that something is authorized property or has authorized use. We see official seals on government documents and know where it comes from.

If this love song is for us, God is saying, "Place me like a seal on your heart." God is inviting us into a relationship where God loves us and it's clear that we belong to God. We talk about baptism as a sign and seal of God's grace. In Ephesians, it says, "When you believed, you were marked in Christ with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit." There's no more powerful way that God says, "You are mine; I have sealed your heart."

But God also asks to be a seal on your arm. This isn't just hidden in your heart. It is on your sleeve. It means that we naturally express our love for God, because our hearts bears God's seal. Others see the love of God in us - the seal on our arm - and are changed.

We express it outwardly, and so others are affected by it. We have to start where we are. If I'm not making God's love evident in my home, then the heart seal doesn't really mean all that much. Others see the seal and are affected by it – encouraged to consider life with God or discouraged.

Today we read: "For love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave." Over-the-top language, right? Not really when it comes to our understanding of God's love. God's love for us is jealous and unyielding – not in the negative and destructive sense. But when we love someone, we want their time and attention.

God is a jealous God. God is jealous for you and me. In Exodus 20, in the Ten Commandments, it says, "You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."

God wants a relationship with you and pursues you with grace - what we call "prevenient grace" that is there all the time - even in moments when we can't feel it. God calls you and me to be focused and devoted in our love toward God. And the love we show affects those who come after us. It really does change the world when we love God and let that love flow into the world and into our relationships!

"Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned." If you give up everything for love, people will be suspect. People might make fun of you. So is this writer saying don't do it? No! But if we give up everything for love, it might bring questions from others. It might be unpopular.

God's love for us is radical and extravagant. Our love for God should be radical and extravagant. And our love for others should be radical and extravagant! The challenge is that it's always risky to love that way. It opens us up and makes us vulnerable - just like expanding that paper heart we used earlier. But that is exactly how God loves us. Can you imagine what would happen if we spent \$19 billion to help others?

We've heard stories where we people show love for others in a powerful and profound way. My friend told me that her uncle's health has improved because he received a kidney from someone in his church who heard about his need. Not every story seems that profound, but every act of love, every word of love, matters. The way that we love each other should cause others to stop and think - and take notice - not to our own glory, but to give glory to God who first loved us!

So our challenge this week is to do something radical and extravagant for someone close to you. Do something over-the-top and excessive! It doesn't mean spend a lot of money. It means do something unexpected that makes your loved one stop and take notice. Write a special note, help them in some way, be more intentional about kind words, or something else - whether it's a spouse, friend, neighbor, parent, mail carrier, or someone else.

And if they wonder what you're doing and ask why you're doing it, you can say, "I'm trying to love you the way God loves me."

May God help us love others the way that God loves us.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.