

“What’s Our Song?”

August 21, 2022

God’s Good Gift of Sexuality series

If you ask couples to give you a song that’s special to them, you might get some of the standards: *At Last* by Etta James, Elvis’ version of *Can’t Help Falling in Love*, *What a Wonderful World* by Louis Armstrong, Shania Twain’s *From This Moment*, or *Thinking Out Loud* by Ed Sheeran. One of my favorites is *Perfect Day* by Lou Reed - not typical, but it tells a simple story of two people spending time together and has a sweet chorus: *Oh, It’s such a perfect day, I’m glad I spend it with you / Such a perfect day - you just keep me hanging on...*

I’m a sucker for a good love song and a good love story. Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters tell those stories well – with some reality, not just sappy stuff. But what about an unnamed couple in Scripture who gives us some of the most intimate images of love? It’s a collection of love poems nestled in between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah at the end of what’s called the Writings and “Wisdom literature” and right before the Prophets. It’s the greatest song by its own description: Song of Songs - or Song of Solomon if you prefer.

We forget that Song of Songs even exists. We skip over it. We might hear a few verses at a wedding, but it’s generally not a preacher’s go-to sermon topic except if you’re going to talk about sexuality. As we’re considering sexuality as one of God’s good gifts, this love poem confirms that our whole humanity, including sexuality, is who we are as God’s good creation. There are positive connections between sexuality and spirituality, and this short book of the Bible usually surprises us.

There is no aspect of our life that our faith discipleship should not inform. Heather Lear writes, “It’s important for churches to foster an environment where people of all ages can wrestle and deal with the things they face in their everyday lives. If we fail to create these spaces in the church, our people are left searching for answers and are often left with only the toxic echo chambers that pervade our airspace, social media feeds, and culture wars.” We’re doing a series on sexuality because it’s in front of us all the time. It’s important, and we need to do a better job of talking about it.

Rev. Michael Ratliff, who has served the larger church in discipleship, writes, “We cannot remain silent and depend on the world outside the church to provide...

people with a perspective on their sexuality. If we do, we should not wonder why their attitudes and beliefs in this area are void of a faith perspective.” If we don’t talk about it, that doesn’t help.

We can offer safe space and be realistic about these issues. We can be honest that we don’t have the same experiences. Simply avoiding talking about sexuality doesn’t help us to magically understand it from a faith perspective, and ultimately it isn’t helpful to making disciples.

In this series, we’ve talked about how language matters. We’ve talked about love languages, but we need to talk about words. In English, we use the word “love” in multiple ways, but other languages have specific words. There are four words for love in Greek:

Eros – romantic, intimate love

Storge – love between family (parents and children), empathy

Phileo – love in friendship

Agape – self-sacrificing love, selfless, self-giving, God’s love

Today, we’re back in the Old Testament, so we’ll learn some Hebrew. We shared a video by Rob Bell, which talks about these:

Ryah – friendship, companion, soul mate

Ahavah – deep affection or care for one another that leads to commitment (ch.8)

Dod – physical/sexual element of a relationship

Song of Songs uses all three words, but is heavy on the last one - *dod*. One writer says, “If this Hebrew love song was modernized, it would be steamier than most romance novels out there! It’s full of passion, desire, pursuit...and pleasure.” Rob Bell’s take is that we need more than just *dod* to make a relationship work, and that’s the struggle we see around us. Remember those 4Cs: covenant, commitment, consent, and care. It’s not enough to have just the physical aspect, so there’s affection and care along with companionship that make for life-giving and other-honoring love.

Some scholars say this poem is an allegory - a picture of God’s love for Israel or, later on, Christ’s love for the church. But, it’s perfectly legitimate to read it as a reflection on God’s good gift of love and intimacy. It’s a poem about sexuality, love, desire, and everything that goes with it.

Poetry is often used to help us understand things on a deeper level, and Song of Songs is full of poetic images - many of them related to nature, even though some might not make too much sense to us (like someone's teeth being described as a flock of sheep whose wool had just been cut!). But who doesn't understand "your love is better than wine?"

It's a picture of God's blessing on human experience of love and desire in its intensity, joy, mystery, and power. That's good news for us! Rachel Held Evans said this: "If Christians have learned anything from our rocky 2,000-year theological history, it's that we make the most beautiful things ugly when we try to systematize mystery. Even the writers of Scripture knew that some things were simply beyond their grasp."

Maybe you've heard it called Song of Solomon. Whether Solomon wrote it or whether it's about him, we know he was a revered king (who had many wives, which is a story for another day). Some scholars claim this is a story of a love triangle where the one with wealth can't "buy" love. It's called Song of Songs because it's "the song" - the greatest song. So, the greatest song is one that shares an intimate picture of a couple's love for each other.

For as much as we sometimes avoid addressing sexuality in the church, Song of Songs does not avoid it at all. This poem is full of vivid imagery to describe desire and love between two people. It's for male and female, but here's a very interesting note - the female voice actually starts it off and has more lines! This is mutual desire - not a one-sided relationship where one person is objectified. This isn't rushed, forced, or coerced, but a beautiful example of two people honoring one another as people made in God's image and addressing love in all of its excitement, spontaneity, beauty, power, and exclusiveness.

In the introduction to Song of Songs in *The Message*, it says, "There are some who would eliminate sex when they think of love, supposing that they are making it more holy. Others, when they think of sex, never think of love." But they're connected, especially when we consider how intimacy can bond us together - body, mind, and spirit.

One commentator wrote that some say that today's younger generations are more open with their bodies and images of their bodies. Yes, it's a different world with access to visual images and camera phones. Yet, they sometimes remain protective of their emotions and spirit—in and out of relationships. But faith says that intimacy is spiritual and can be nurtured to be a great life-giving part

of relationships. A clergy colleague, Abigail Parker Herrera wrote, “We can help people of all ages understand that investment of self, and the invitation to vulnerability are important elements of humanity.”

We have to be clear about what we mean when we talk about love, especially as it relates to physical intimacy and sexuality. Much of what is portrayed as “love” is really “lust.” Someone said, “The desire of lust is to get. The desire of love is to give.” As William White says, “Love endures all things (words from First Corinthians 13); lust endures very little.” Perhaps this is another way of saying it: **SLIDE** - *Do things from love. Not for love.*

We’re called to vulnerability, which is what we read in Song of Songs. This is a relationship of mutual commitment, desire, and love. This is consensual – again not coerced or forced. It’s a real relationship - not imagined. This is not a transaction, but a relationship. This is two people who want to be together - not a person and a pixelated screen. I say that because Internet pornography is a real issue – many times for people of faith. We’re not immune to that temptation.

In a time when pornography continues to be big business, Song of Songs stands against anything that would lessen the depth and breadth of human sexuality - and the good gift of God meant to be shared in covenant and commitment. *Love can’t be bought, love can’t be sold—it’s not to be found in the marketplace.* Love should be respected, protected, and honored. Sexuality isn’t a commodity. Human trafficking is a real thing – not just in some other place, but here in our community.

Our Social Principles comment on Human Sexuality: *We affirm that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift.* How often do we understand ourselves as stewards of that gifts?

And about Pornography: *Scripture teaches that humans are created in God’s image and that we are accountable to God through right relationship. Images can celebrate the goodness of human sexuality through positive depiction in art, literature, and education. We deplore, however, images that distort this goodness and injure healthy sexual relationships.*

If you’re struggling with any issues or you know someone who is, there are resources that can help. If you’re doing something that can harm you or those you love, please hear God’s call to honor yourself and others - to seek God’s help and seek healing.

Song of Songs is our song as people who seek to celebrate God’s good gift of sexuality. Song of Songs reminds us that intimacy is another way we know one

another - nurturing closeness and trust. Song of Songs is our song - reminding us of the power of love to do great good when we honor one another. But it's also able to do great harm and cause great pain when we honor one another. **SLIDE:** Do things from love. Not for love.

May God help us as we seek to follow faithfully and honor one another as God's good creation,

Let us pray...