

WHAT DOES LOVE HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

Sermon by Tom Conger

Damascus United Methodist Church

Song of Solomon 2:8-13; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost – August 30, 2009

Good morning. I heard through the grapevine that today is the only Sunday, in the entire lectionary cycle, that the book, Song of Solomon is quoted from. After all it's a book of love. And I have a lot of love to give. Maybe we could petition the Methodist minds in charge and get them to let us talk about it more than once every three years. In Song of Solomon chapter 2 vs. 8-13, there seems to be plenty of love to go around in the fair maiden's recollection of an encounter with her man. Although, I am concerned about the long term potential of the relationship. Her attraction is obviously a physical one as she sees her lover as a young, strong chiseled stag charging in to sweep her off her feet and make all of life's little problems melt away. Unfortunately, her lover is more interested in first getting a good meal, with her of course. I admittedly have a lot in common with this guy, as I love a good meal. Grilled dove with a candied fig glaze is one of my favorite September dishes, and I have grape vines growing in the back yard. And once, right before my own wedding I traded my vintage 1966 mustang fastback for a whole church and reception hall full of beautiful spring flowers.

God has abundantly provided for all of their needs. Providing an earth full of food and flowers and fragrances to stimulate and satisfy them, and their desire and excitement for each other seems enough to overcome anything. A seemingly perfect courtship, played out in a garden **full** of Gods creations, **all** just for the two of them. The rest of the book reads a lot like the verses 8 to 13, describing in great detail the human pleasure and satisfaction to be found in humbly giving yourself to another. A **gift**, by the way, that God created for us, and wants us to have, as long as we don't forget about him. King Solomon and his bride had it all, and could have kept it all, but in the end their situation reminds me of another couple God provided for by planting them in the garden of Eden, and promising eternity.

But what's love got to do with it?

In the readings from Mark, the Pharisees and scribes seem to be coming up a little short on love for Jesus. It's kind of deceiving, because you could view their questioning of Jesus as one rooted in concern for the disciples. After all, they were all fellow Jews and in their eyes their brothers were breaking tradition by not washing as a precaution to separate themselves from anything unclean, and they were worried. I say precaution because their hands may not have actually been soiled, but were washed anyway. But

what were they worried about? Socially, the Pharisees were in a pretty good place in the community, and stood unchallenged religiously, as they, along with the Sadducees, were the keepers of Jewish law and tradition. But they chose to follow only those that suited them. They even made up their own rules, and over the years had twisted the ones that God gave them to fit their own liking and traditions. Things were good.

But ascension to power is a funny thing. If ones intentions are not pure and honorable, the ascension, and following reign, become an unsustainable tangle of lies and deceit that in the end wind up alienating the very people that placed them there. The Pharisees were supposed to be a source of strength and support and wisdom to their people, Gods chosen people, and instead their judgment and discernment became so clouded, that they either didn't recognize Jesus as God in human form, or they did and felt so threatened by his love that they turned against him in an attempt to remain in power. The irony is that God gave these commandments and laws to the Jewish people not only because He loved them, but as preparation for the moment in time when He would enter the world as a humbled servant and love like no other ever has or ever will. Jesus' response to their question in verses 6 through 8 cuts deep into the heart. He quotes from Isaiah the prophet during a time in Israel's' history when they were referred to as being hypocritical with God, by honoring Him with their lips and not their hearts. A history lesson that shouldn't have been forgotten especially by the Pharisees who, after all , were in charge of keeping track of all of that stuff. Jesus obviously saw through the superficial question which was crafted to discredit him as a leader, in front of his disciples, **and** the masses that followed him and listened to his teaching. Jesus uses the situation as another teaching moment to solidify his point with a parable, and teaches in versus 14 and 15 that being unclean comes from **within**. Once isolated from the crowd the disciples ask Jesus the meaning of the parable. Jesus' explanation fulfills existing Jewish law and tradition by telling the disciples that being unclean is no longer a condition to be handled by using a ritualistic procedure. A procedure that among other things, was created by God to teach submission and dependence on Him, and to set the Jews apart as Gods' chosen people. Let's all Read aloud verses 21 22 and 23 found in your bulletin.....for it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

You see Jesus is trying to get the disciples to see that no form of existing Jewish tradition can make them clean, wash away the sin in their hearts ,and eternally close the separation that exists between God and man. Jesus was setting the table, and preparing the disciples for His perfect gift to come, the only gift able to heal the human heart. This moment in time, designed by God, and lived out by his chosen people, brings them to a place that only the teachings of Christ could fulfill.

So what's love got to do with it? Our world today is riddled with examples of injustice and irresponsibility from all social levels and classes, from the highest form of government, to the most needy recipient, and all points inbetween. No one is immune. Entire countries of people in some places in the world still live under the repression of wealthy, ruthless leaders while they remain isolated from technology, medicine and food. The world has thrown money at these problems for years, meeting a desperate, obvious immediate humanitarian need, but not really solving for X. I wonder what Amanda Jones in Nicaragua, or Alicia Feuillet, who is in Africa, would have to say about that. In fact Donna Feuillet, Paula Goldberg and my wife Diana found a seed company in the Carolinas with literally hundreds of pounds of vegetable seeds that were donateable to Alicia's cause in Africa, a cause that included establishing nourishing gardens for a people in tremendous need. How many gardeners do we have in church today? If you were to weigh a pound of tomato seeds, how many seeds would you have to count out to make up a pound. Anyone.....roughly 12,000. That's 12,000 tomato plants from one pound of seed. The biggest fight we have in our house each year happens in the spring and revolves around the number of tomato plants my wife wants to put in our garden. I vote for less, she votes for more. This year she put in 24, while I was preoccupied loading our truck for a trip to the beach. Do you have any idea how many tomatoes come off of 24 tomato plants, put in good soil. 250 tomatoes have been picked off of our plants this week alone. That's a lot. In the end neither money nor reason were able to cut through the red tape that stood in the way.

So, I ask again, what's love got to do with it?

If we re-examine the readings from today we see that Jesus proves to the disciples early in his ministry that the problem was in their heart. The psalmist acknowledges God as the ever enduring source of goodness. Like the psalmist, James explains that every generous act of giving and every perfect gift reliably comes from God. James wrote his letter to encourage first century Jewish Christians, whom at the time were surrounded by people using intellect as a substitute for true faith. James delivers to them, a **step by step** instruction manual. If you would read with me verses 19 and 20, "You must understand this, my beloved: you must be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness".

That's sound advice to keep them from losing their temper in a religious discussion with someone having a professionally trained mind. In verse 21, read with me if you will, "Therefore rid yourselves of all **soridness** (is spelling correct?) and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls".

James tells them:

#1 they must be ready to let go of the bad stuff,

#2 humble themselves and at the same time have faith in God to carry them while

they are vulnerable, and then

#3 **choose** to welcome the implanted word of God into their heart.

The final versus now call them into action to be doers of the word and not just hearers.....the difference between knowing in one's mind, and doing from one's heart. Without God, the lovers in Song of Solomon **don't** live happily ever after. Without God, some of the first century Jewish Christians that blew off James' message became merely hearers of the word and not doers. Without God, our world's problems will never be permanently solved.

And what happened to the disciples? The very disciples who were handpicked by, and were living, in real time, with Jesus Christ the Son of God, the very disciples that were in the lesson from the book of Mark. Some of the disciples paths looked a lot like our own, wavering between denial and faith but eventually getting it done, some came out of the gate strong and stayed that way most of the time. And sadly one did not get it until after Jesus' final submission to him. Y without God, **no form of love is sustainable**. So you see, in the end love has everything to do with it. Amen.