

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**

***“Biblical Romance”***

***August 30, 2009***

***Reverend Art Ritter***

***Song of Solomon 2:8-13***

<sup>8</sup>*The voice of my beloved!*

*Look, he comes,  
leaping upon the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.*

<sup>9</sup>*My beloved is like a gazelle  
or a young stag.*

*Look, there he stands  
behind our wall,  
gazing in at the windows,  
looking through the lattice.*

<sup>10</sup>*My beloved speaks and says to me:*

*‘Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away;*

<sup>11</sup>*for now the winter is past,  
the rain is over and gone.*

<sup>12</sup>*The flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtle-dove  
is heard in our land.*

<sup>13</sup>*The fig tree puts forth its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.*

*Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away.*

Ah love! Ain't it grand? There is the story about a man who had been married for over twenty years. When he returned home from working late one night he found his wife packing her bags. "What in the world are you doing?" he asked her. She cried, "I just can't take it anymore! Lately we've done nothing but fight, argue, complain, and bicker with each other. This marriage is over. I've decided to leave." The man stood in complete shock and disbelief. He watched as his wife of over twenty years walked out of the house and apparently out of his life. Suddenly, he dashed into the bedroom, pulled a suitcase down from the closet shelf, and threw in some clothes. Running outside, dragging the suitcase, he yelled ahead to his wife, "Wait for me! I can't take it anymore either. I'm going with you!"

The words of Scripture may have been a bit startling to you this morning. They were not part of a syrupy card I found at the local Hallmark store. They are not the opening chapter of a best-selling Harlequin romance. They are from the Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon. It might surprise some that the Bible contains such poetry, words of love written by a man and a woman who very much like teenagers in the midst of a crush, have eyes only for one another.

The Song of Songs is a unique book. It is one of two books in the Bible that does not directly mention God. The words of the book are filled with expressions of delight in the beauty of creation and more importantly in the appreciation of the emotion that is human love. Scholar Phyllis Tribble writes that the Song of Songs was a description of the Garden of Eden before sin was introduced. Here love is woven with play, imagination and delight. After Eden, and away from the Song of Songs, love and human relationships are burdened with guilt, judgment, obligation and even shame.

Supposedly there was a great debate among the Hebrew priests about or not the book should be accepted into the sacred Scripture. Perhaps it was only a fluke that such a book was accepted. It didn't hurt that the poems were originally attributed to King Solomon, although he probably had nothing to do with them. These were love songs sung in ancient Israel in the fourth or fifth century before Jesus. The poems were then read at Hebrew wedding feasts. While the dignified priests may have been embarrassed at such readings in a formal ceremony, apparently those attending expected to hear one or two "songs" at every wedding. I would guess that in that day, the Song of Songs was read at weddings as often as Paul Stookey's "The Wedding Song" was sung in the seventies and eighties.

Still later the people of faith began to interpret these love songs as analogies, as an account of the relationship between God and God's people, and then Christ and the Church as Christ's bride. As men and women long for one another in love, so humanity should long for God's love. But in modern study, scholars have determined that the Song of Songs was actually written to be more romantic than spiritual or theological. Because the words are sappy and in some cases rather suggestive, we don't use them very often in worship. In fact this Sunday is the only Sunday in the three year lectionary cycle that the Song of Songs is selected for a worship reading. As a colleague wrote on an internet discussion page, "We never studied this in Sunday School at the church where I grew up!" Give us preachers a law or rule or even a grim admonition and we can speak for hours. But give us the subject of a couple of young people in love and we'll probably choose to talk about something else- like a law or rule or grim admonition.

At her recent birthday party, Laura took out the card that I had written for her and read it aloud in front of all of our guests. She was moved by what I wrote and I was honored that she felt so touched by my simple prose. But I was a little embarrassed hearing my private words exposed in front of others. I sensed that some of the listeners, especially the men, were a bit uncomfortable, perhaps wishing that I had purchased Laura a 99 cent Shoebox card instead. Perhaps I feel the same way about the Song of Songs. I know this kind of emotion exists but I'm not real comfortable processing it or dealing with it thoughtfully.

The best explanation I heard about the value of these words was one offered by a 16 year old girl at a church summer camp. After reading a chapter of the Song of Songs, a Bible Study leader asked the campers why such a book might be in the Holy Scripture. The campers were strangely quiet. No one knew what to say or perhaps they were all too embarrassed to speak. Finally one of the girls spoke up and said, "It is there because it is about beautiful things!" And perhaps these words are in our Bible to remind us that romantic love and passion are beautiful things given to us by God.

Did you really catch those words as they were read in our Scripture lesson? Some of you might recognize a couple of verses as the ones Ernie Harwell used to read at the beginning of each Detroit Tiger season. Who knew that the start of the baseball season was heralded by a poem of romantic passion? The rest of this is really quite mushy. "My love is like a gazelle, racing across the hills, running over the mountains." How about, "the figs are beginning to ripen and the air is fragrant with blossoms. Come my love and be with me!" The sugar just oozes! Our children would say "Yuck! Get a room!" As I think about it, this author probably wouldn't get a job writing verse at Hallmark. It is too syrupy. But here it is in the Bible.

A few years ago a college professor at Duke University published a collection of love letters in a book. The book contained the personal letters of people like Albert Einstein, Jack London, and Ernest Hemmingway. One can only imagine the love letters of Albert Einstein! If you read David McCullough's biography of John Adams, you will find that much of the information in the book comes

from the love letters exchanged between husband wife, John and Abigail. I guess it is comforting to know that such learned minds and noteworthy people can truly as human as we are. It is refreshing to know that these men and women could feel the emotion of love and write about it.

And maybe that is the same way I feel about the Song of Songs. We all know that the Bible teaches us a great deal about loving our brothers and sisters. We even stubbornly admit that the Bible encourages us to love our enemies. Yes, Biblical love is generally brotherly love or self-giving love. Biblical love is upright, dignified and somewhat rational.

As a human being then it is encouraging to know that God understands the passion and the non-rational ways of romantic love. It is good to know that such love has a place in God's word. These honest expressions of love remind us that love comes in many forms. Perhaps the Greeks understood this better than we do. They understood God's love as agape or brotherhood, philia or fellowship, and eros or romantic. All forms of love, including romantic, come from the same source—the love of God. God doesn't put us in a position where we have to choose between a life of faith that ignores romance and passion and a culture that sometimes makes an idol out of lust. The presence of such a book in our sacred Scripture would teach us that we can have a love which cares for our brothers and sisters and a love that moves us to passion for another also. Indeed, although God is not specifically mentioned in the book, the presence of God seems to pulse through all of the images in the Song of Songs. And it is God who celebrates with us when we find romance within the trust and fidelity of a sacred covenant with another person.

Martin Copenhaver, a United Church of Christ pastor in Massachusetts, writes about an experience of love that he discovered. As a teenager exploring an attic, he found some rather passionate love letter written by his grandparents to each other when they were in the throes of young love. Copenhaver says that the discovery of those letters completed the picture of his grandparents for him. Before reading the letters he knew that they were upright and dignified people. Now they were more earthy and authentic. They began to be real, holding dear the same kind of emotions that he was now experiencing for himself in life. And he gained a stronger hope for his own future, despite all of the complex urges and feelings he was processing. If they survived and thrived, perhaps he could too!

The Song of Songs teaches me that romantic love is a gift of God, full of God. It is an important part of that which God gives to us to make us our lives special and meaningful. Romantic love is a divine gift that allows us to more fully appreciate the others blessings of life. Those who are lucky enough to experience, or to have experienced love, can catch a fleeting glimpse of the kind of passion that God has for all of humanity. We are each loved as if we were the only ones who matter. God's love is big enough to do that. In the Song of Songs, in the words of the two lovers, we can find not only the assurance of our own humanity, but we also hear the voice of God's love for us.