

Love Song
Songs of Solomon 1:15-2:4
February 14, 2010

Years ago, Paul McCartney and his wife Linda wrote a pop song in which the lyrics read:

"You'd think that people would have had enough of silly love songs
But I look around me and I see it isn't so
Some people wanna fill the world with silly love songs
And what's wrong with that, I'd like to know, 'cause here I go again...
I Love You."

It does seem as if songwriters DO fill the world with silly love songs. Just google "Top 10 Love Songs," and you'll get as many different titles of tunes as you have people listing them. No one list is the same as any others, that's for certain.

Our scripture today comes from one of the most overlooked and underpreached books of the Bible that is entitled in some of your Bibles as The Song of Solomon and in others you might find it under Song of Songs. Its full title is the Song of Songs of Solomon, which, if Billboard had been around back then, we would have understood it to be called Solomon's Greatest Hits.

One of the reasons it isn't usually the source for sermon material is that many view it as just a series of silly love songs. After all, you find verses like in Chapter 6 "Your hair is like a flock of goats moving down the slopes of Gilead; your teeth are like a flock of ewes that have come up from the washing, all of them bear twins, not one among them is bereaved. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil," and so forth. To a serious person of faith, it just sounds like a collection of sentimental mush that doesn't seem appropriate when talking about the transcendent nature of God.

Another reason it is rarely used in sermons is that at best, censors of what is appropriate for public consumption would rate it PG-13 in some parts, and R in others. After all, there are children present in worship, and some of the imagery in this book of the Hebrew scriptures contains very adult material.

Finally, nowhere in this book is God referred to—the subject matter is simply the protestations of love between two individuals who only have eyes for each other, like two young lovers who grope one another in public, oblivious to who is watching, uncaring to who is staring.

So how on earth did the Solomon's Greatest Love Songs get in the Bible? How did it make the cut when compilers of the Holy Scriptures were deciding which books got in and which were left out? What redeeming religious value could such a collection of silly love songs have for people of faith like you and me?

One reason it might have been included was that the poet historically attributed to have written these verses happened to have been *King Solomon*, David's son. It was Solomon who built the great temple and brought Israel to a place of prominence on the world stage. His wisdom as a national leader was legendary. And, as we hear in other parts of the Hebrew Bible, he had many wives. Yet one—perhaps a daughter of Pharaoh, or the queen of Sheba, or simply an ordinary serving girl—captured his heart in a way that none of the others had. Perhaps it was because it was Solomon and he was such an important figure for the people of Israel that his book of love songs was included in the text.

Still another reason for its inclusion was that early Jewish scholars viewed this collection of love lyrics as an allegory for the way God loved the chosen people, the nation of Israel. Later Christian theologians agreed that the collection was an allegory, but descriptive of the way that Jesus loves the church. Have any of you ever heard the metaphor of the church being the bride of Christ? Those who supported this interpretation of the

Songs of Solomon were some of the brightest minds in the early Christian business—Origin, Augustine, Jerome, John Wesley, and the editors of the King James Version of the Bible.

“St. Bernard of Clairvaux followed this line of interpretation in 86 sermons on the Song of Songs, a series that covered only two chapters and three verses. Eighty-six sermons can take the joy out of any subject, but one can't help wondering if the saint protesteth too much.” Christian Century, August 10, 1994 by Martin Copenhaver

Yet, as Martin Copenhaver pointed out in The Christian Century journal, “Even after such thorough allegorization one cannot escape the impression that the author of the Song of Songs actually was doing what he appeared to be doing, and what more straitlaced interpreters seem loath to admit he was doing--namely, celebrating human love with poetry, reveling in romance and sexuality.”

Valentine's Day seems the perfect occasion to read the Song of Songs, don't you agree? Copenhaver wrote, “Were it not for the Song of Songs we might conclude that we have to choose between a culture that understands only romance--and a faith that leaves no room for romance. The presence of the Song of Songs in the Bible reminds us that we can have God, fidelity, all the higher expressions of love, and still have our romance too.

“We are often reminded that the Greeks had a number of words for the single English word love. There is the eros of lovers, the philia of friends, the agape of self-giving. From this we might assume that the Greeks knew more about love than we do.

But there are other times when we can see that all forms of love spring from the same source. Perhaps that is why love poetry was never purely secular for Israel, and why Jewish and Christian interpreters found God looming in the midst of this romantic revelry. So even though God is not

mentioned in the Song of Songs and even though we should resist making it a strict allegory, the presence of God does seem to pulse through the songs' romantic imagery. The ebullient springs of romantic love can be traced back to their source in God, even if not all lovers are inclined to do so.

“To be in love with someone is to find your whole being tied up with the beloved, to want to be wherever the beloved is, to want good things for him or her. You can no more forget the one you love than you could forget your own name or forget that you are alive. No one else will do. You want to share yourself, all of yourself, with the beloved, and you want all of him or her in return. Separation is restless sorrow. In reunion the world seems complete again.” Ibid.

And it is more than that, also. To be in love with someone is to commit one's self for the long haul, understanding that it means give and take, intimacy and distance, even frustration and forgiveness. It also means that a spark of the poetry survives after long years of fidelity and loyalty to another.

There's a story about a husband and wife who were celebrating their golden wedding anniversary—fifty years of married life. Having spent most of the day with relatives and friends at a big party given in their honor, they were back home again. They decided, before retiring, to have a little snack of tea with bread and butter. They went into the kitchen, where the husband opened up a new loaf of bread and handed the end piece (the heel) to his wife.

She exploded. She said, “For fifty years you have been dumping the heel of the bread on me. I will not take it anymore; this lack of concern for me and what I like.” On and on she went in the bitterest of terms, for offering her the heel of the bread.

The husband was absolutely astonished at her tirade. When she had finished, he said to her quietly, "But honey, it's my favorite piece."
("Communication after many years." Illustrations Unlimited. James. L. Hewett, ed., Tyndale. 1988. pg. 332)

It was her turn to be non-plussed. Her eyes melted, and without a word she took the sliced heel that was offered to her—tasting something new and fresh in each bite—even after 50 years.

"Those who are caught up in such a love for another can catch a fragmentary, often fleeting glimpse of the love God has for God's beloved. God loves Israel that much. Christ loves each of church that much. Christ loves each of us as if we were the only one.´ offering us the best of himself—all of himself. (Copenhaver, op. cit.)

So on this Valentine 's Day, I want to invite us to go home and read this text in its entirety. Parents, if you have kids at home, choose some verses that you think are appropriate and read them out loud just as Betty and Glenn/Rob and Amanda did today. Let your children hear how much you love one another, and if you want to insert your own descriptive phrases of how you feel for one another, go ahead and add your love poetry to the text.

And then, read the text a second time, this time hearing God's words of love just for you. Feel God's touch on your skin; receive God's appreciation of your flesh and bones and teeth and hair and every beautiful inch of you that was created by our Creator's own hands. Receive this text as you would receive a Valentine card from your Lord.

Finally, read the text a third time, speaking the words back to God, touching the face of God with wonder, loving God with your whole being. "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave. Its flashes are

flashes of fire, a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it." (8:6-7a)

The Song of Songs of Solomon is a gift to us because it values that which we seem to yearn for most, the sensual love between one another. It gives worth to our physical intimacy in ways that fly in the face of the callous and casual and even trashy way we treat it in our culture.

Yes, when you find yourself reading it, you may give a giggle now and then. It does sound like a silly love song at different points. But like all love songs that try to describe what feels indescribable between two individuals, there is a depth of meaning and passion that only the two of them understand.

Paul and Linda McCartney, who wrote the lyrics to the song I referred to at the beginning of this sermon, used to live in Tucson part of the year. I never saw them during my 15 year sojourn in the desert, but there were people in my church who would come in with McCartney family sightings at the Blockbuster video or the Circle K convenience store near their ranch in the far northeast part of the city.

You may know that Linda fought a valiant battle with breast cancer that took her life in 1998. During the last year of life, she was sequestered at the ranch with Paul and their children, spending their days with her doing what she loved best—riding horses, walking in the desert, watching the sunsets. Hospice workers and other caregivers who came out to the ranch to help when she got too weak to do anything else reported that Paul was constantly by her side, holding her, singing to her—loving her. They would have been married 30 years had been able to live 5 more months.

When you know that about them, you can't hear Silly Love Song in the same way. "How can I tell you about my loved one," Paul sings over and over again. Doesn't sound silly to me, after all.