

**“A Worthwhile Ride”**  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**Transfiguration of the Lord**  
**February 14, 2021**

**Scripture Reading: Song of Songs 8:6-7 (NRSV)**

<sup>6</sup>Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. <sup>7</sup>Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.



**Sermon: “A Worthwhile Ride”**

In the gospels, when the Scribes and experts in the law are trying to trap Jesus, they quiz him as to which law is the greatest. Jesus says the greatest law is that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that you love your neighbor as yourself. Now over the years we’ve talked a lot about what that love looks like. And it’s not about having warm fuzzy feelings towards everybody. It’s about doing the things Paul talks about in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians: patience, kindness, not behaving in a way that is envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude towards other people. Rejoicing when the truth is told, and not praising people for doing wrong.<sup>1</sup> That’s the love for others we are called to. That’s the love of others that is required of us. That’s the love of others that is based in our actions and how we treat one another, even if we don’t particularly like one another.

But today is Valentine’s Day, and on Valentine’s Day we celebrate emotional love. Which is love born not of requirement, but of our feelings towards another person. And if the love of neighbor that Paul describes is one of the responsibilities of following God. This kind of love is one of the great gifts of God. It’s a gift we experience in close friendships, and in marriage, and long-term relationships with a significant other. It’s a gift that we celebrate in art, write songs about, and make endless Hallmark movies about. To love and be loved by another is one of the most basic elements of the human experience.

And yet as much as the Bible has to say about love, it doesn’t say that much about these kinds of deeply intimate personal relationships. But here, nestled in among the Old Testament stories of political intrigue, religious reforms, national disasters, and divine revelation we find the book Song of Songs, a brief set of poems that deal exclusively with romantic love and that show two people expressing their love and desire for one another.

Just eight chapters long, the book is filled with intimate language; the pair referring to one another as “beloved,” and “darling.” There are expressions of desire and passion. There is sensuality, longing, and playfulness. We find here an unabashed celebration of human intimacy and passion and romantic love.

Song of Songs is also noteworthy because, together with Esther, they are the only two books of the Bible that do not mention God by name. And while Esther does mention the feast of Purim and the ritual of fasting, Song of Songs makes no overt mention of anything we would call religious. Early Church authorities probably saw it as an allegory of God’s love for humanity or of Christ’s love for the church. But at its core, Song of Songs is a celebration of God’s gift of human love.

The gold standard for romantic love in the arts is probably Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. It was a play that I was forced to read as a high school sophomore. *Romeo and Juliet* was therefore, one of my earliest introductions to the concept of romantic love. And what an introduction it was. The two star-crossed lovers meet, fall in love, secretly marry, and commit suicide rather than be forced to live apart from one another. And all of that takes place in the space of one week. One. Week.

I don’t know. That just seems like a lot of really big life decisions being made in an extremely short period of time. But the theme seems to be that love is this irresistible force that overcomes the powers of human experience; powers like family, loyalty, tradition, hatred, and death.

In their total commitment to each other, and their willingness to die to be together, Romeo and Juliet’s love essentially links them together forever, forming a single identity. Think about it, if I say either of those names, most people will immediately think of the other. And their love and passion for one another is so strong that not the hatred of their families, nor the power of circumstance can stop it. If this sounds familiar it’s because we just heard that very same idea expressed in this passage from Song of Songs.

In this poem, the woman speaks more often than her male counterpart. Which in and of itself is notable in scripture as women rarely have this kind of voice in the Bible. And she says “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm...”

A seal is like a signature. And today your signature is your life. For just about any document to be official, you need to sign it. But back then, handwriting was not distinct between individuals and many people, including great rulers, couldn’t write at all, so a signature didn’t necessarily mean anything. What could provide proof was your seal or signet. This could be unique to the individual. Often made of precious metals, you would use them to make an imprint on documents or possessions to show authorship and/or ownership. Because of their importance, they were kept close to the person; on a string around the neck or as a ring on the owner’s hand.<sup>2</sup>

Here, the woman “asks him to take her as the visible mark... of his own identity. She petitions to be indispensable to his being who he is.”<sup>3</sup> By setting her as the seal and signet that he wears, he makes her the symbol of his own identity. They become inseparably linked. His identity is tied up in hers and hers in him.

And then she continues to speak saying “for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.” The song credits the experience of love as one that is the strongest of all the forces of nature. Love is as powerful and irresistible as death. The argument is not that love is stronger than death... but that in the same way that death is an irresistible and unstoppable force, so is love.

When King Edward VIII of Great Britain fell in love with American actress Wallis Simpson and proposed marriage, it created a bit of a constitutional crisis in England. She was not believed suitable for a King and the legality of their relationship was called into question. It became clear that he could not marry her and remain King. So, in 1936, he gave up the throne to marry, and spend the rest of his life with, the woman he loved.<sup>4</sup> It remains the only time a British King has abdicated the throne voluntarily.<sup>5</sup>

But this depth of intimacy, this fierce loyalty exists not just in romantic relationships but in the close-knit friendships that can also develop over the course of a lifetime. In the Old Testament story of David, we find an interesting account of his friendship with Jonathan the son of King Saul. Remember, Saul was jealous of David and tried to kill him, but Jonathan subverted those attempts. The writer of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel tells us that “the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.”<sup>6</sup> We learn that “Jonathan took great delight in David,”<sup>7</sup> and “loved him as he loved his own life.”<sup>8</sup> And that when David did finally have to flee the wrath of Saul, “they kissed each other, and wept with each other; David wept the more” and they made a covenant together saying “The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever.”<sup>9</sup>

That’s a friendship deeper than mere casual acquaintances, and more profound than a connection through social media. That’s an abiding relationship characterized by loyalty, intimacy, and love.

Now it’s also possible that David and Jonathan were more than just friends. It is possible that they were gay. Some of you might be offended at the very idea. But while the writer of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel doesn’t say that they are, the writer also doesn’t say that they aren’t. Which probably means that the writer doesn’t really care. Because all that matters, is the strength of the love between them.

If you’ve ever had a close friend who you love like your own family, then you know. And for many people, close friends are their family. There’s the family you’re born into and the family you choose. And those relationships are every bit as foundational and nourishing to the soul as your family of origin or a marriage. In those relationships we are loved, encouraged and nurtured. In those relationships we experience a measure of God’s love for us.

Whether they involve romantic feelings or not, these close, intimate connections with another person are God’s gift to us. They sustain us. They provide a listening ear and a shoulder to lean on when times are difficult. They are the people we can be vulnerable with. Maintaining a façade of strength when we feel weak or of courage when we are afraid can be exhausting. But these friends, companions, and spouses are people who know us intimately, and they are safe harbors to which we can turn and just be ourselves without fear of judgement.

Whether romantic, or platonic; whether we call them “soulmate,” “girlfriend,” or “brother from another mother,” they are precious vessels through which we know and experience God’s love for us. That love and care for, and intimate connection with, another person sustains us; it feeds and nourishes us, it gives life flavor, and it embodies the intimate, nurturing, comforting love of God for each one of us.

It is often said that “It’s love that makes the world go round.” But I prefer the words of author Franklin P. Jones who said “Love doesn’t make the world go ‘round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile.”<sup>10</sup> And for that we give thanks to God. Happy Valentine’s Day.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 13, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Jenson, Robert W. *Song of Songs*. Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2005. 90. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Jenson, 90

<sup>4</sup> "Edward VIII Abdication Crisis." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 31 Aug. 2015.  
<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward\\_VIII\\_abdication\\_crisis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_VIII_abdication_crisis)>.

<sup>5</sup> "Abdication: British and Commonwealth History." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 31 Aug. 2015.  
<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdication#British\\_and\\_Commonwealth\\_history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdication#British_and_Commonwealth_history)>.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Samuel 18:1, NRSV

<sup>7</sup> 1 Samuel 19:1, NRSV

<sup>8</sup> 1 Samuel 20:17, NRSV

<sup>9</sup> 1 Samuel 20:41-42, NRSV

<sup>10</sup> "Franklin P. Jones Quotes." *BrainyQuote*. Xplore, n.d. Web. 31 Aug. 2015.  
<[http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/f/franklin\\_p\\_jones.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/f/franklin_p_jones.html)>.