

Sermon Love Poem by Kit Greaves, August 29, 2021
Pray

What's your favourite love song?

Love songs at weddings and anniversaries; a love song can bring it all back. As much as I love my wife, and it was our anniversary this past week, I couldn't remember the song we danced our first dance at our wedding reception; I'll tell you what song at the end.

Whether you're married or not, what's your favourite love song? (ask Congregation...) Maybe it's "Love is on the Rocks" like Neil Diamond sang, "Love stinks," "Love Hurts," or Tina Turner belting out, "What's love got to do with it?" We've attached a fun 40 Day Love Dare Challenge as part of today's email that might help a couple avoid a divorce. Some of the 40 day challenges might mend a friendship, if applied with discretion.

Maybe your favourite love song is Etta James singing "At Last!," Elvis Presley's "Love Me Tender" or "Dream" by the Everly Brothers. Don Everly died this week. Maybe your love song is Why Do Fools Fall in Love? by Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, 1964, the Beatles "Long and winding Road." Maybe it's Andrea Bocelli and Celine Dion singing The Prayer, Andrei Rieu's violin solo in The Theme from Romeo and Juliet, Billy Joel's "Just the way you are," Ed Sheeran "Thinking Out Loud", "All of Me" by John Legend, Drake's "Find your Love," Adele's "Make you Feel My Love," or "Love Story" by Taylor Swift.

In a 2015 article by Dr Nerissa Hannick of the University of Melbourne called "The Science Behind Love Songs," Dr Hannick argues there's truth behind the emotion that can be tracked through bodily processes, and the release of hormones.

Jesus understands feelings and hormones and has grasped something greater. And so, I offer a teaching on purity from what Jesus was driving at in Mark chapter 7 and from the provocative poetry of Solomon's Song of Songs: intimate without being graphic, full of love, but not gratuitous, sexual, but not gross. So, start me up.

The truth Jesus presents, which was part of his teaching about the kingdom of God coming, takes a different line, a radical line, like someone suggesting 100 years ago that Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people in Canada are equal. It wasn't something people wanted to hear back then. Thank God, it's changing. We don't need to drive the Indian out but the drive out hypocrisy.

Tom Wright says in his Mark Commentary that "popular religion and philosophy, from at least the time of Plato, have often suggested that the physical world is bad and the spiritual world is good." We expect Jesus to say that kind of thing. So, when he says that food doesn't matter and the heart does, what we are ready to hear is 'externals – physical things don't matter; what matters are the internal, spiritual things.' And so, since what he says looks like that at first glance, we assume he's said what we expect him to say. And since we can fit that view into other things people believe, the passage doesn't disturb us.

But that would be wrong. The passage from Mark chapter 7 should disturb us. Jesus is precisely NOT saying that external and physical things are irrelevant or bad and internal or spiritual things are good. Jesus is NOT saying that if we get in touch with our deepest feelings, or learn to listen to what our heart is truly telling us, we will find our real identity and thereby discover happiness, fulfillment or whatever. He is not saying to NOT wash your hands. Wash your hands, already! Get vaccinated. I added that part, but it fits. Jesus IS insisting that good and bad external and physical actions from internal and spiritual sources, and therefore the poisoned wells of human motivation are the real problem to which the purity laws are pointing. We cannot isolate one part of our human make-up and blame it for evil. We cannot suggest that 'getting in touch with our truest feelings' will get us sorted out. What if the feelings that most truly express who we are turn out to be murderous, adulterous, envious or ambitious to the point of egotistically denigrating our coworkers and ignoring one's family? The fact that the feelings are there, in our hearts, does not mean they are thereby validated.

On the contrary, it means we have a problem, a problem that runs right through us. There is a crack in the foundation, which cannot be repaired on the exterior; the whole structure is faulty. Keeping physical purity laws can be a way of papering over the crack; so 'getting in touch with your feelings' can be too simplistic a solution. If there is evil, it infects the whole. That's what purity and impurity is really all about.

Jesus' basic point is that purity laws, including food laws, don't actually touch the real human problem, and that that is what the kingdom of God addresses. The Covenant God made with Israel was reaching its completion in Jesus. The scriptures spoke of purity and set up codes of washing, eating and drinking as a distinctive of the Jewish nation over against other nations, not as a weapon of cultural and ethical superiority. The laws were signposts to the covenant and kingdom of God; Jesus is offering the reality. When you arrive at the destination you don't need the signposts any more, not because they were worthless, but precisely because they were correct. The Jewish scriptures were never meant to be a time-less code of behaviour. They were not, including the purity laws, irrelevant; the deeper truth to which they pointed had now arrived. Everything the scriptures were getting at, reached a peak in Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection, passionate in his thinking, active in loving God and loving the crown of God's creation: us, humanity, humanity that needed saving from itself and its narrow view; from now on everything is different.

Let's look at a picture of how things can be different. From the Message translation of Song of Songs 2:13 "Lilacs are exuberantly purple and perfumed, and cherry trees fragrant with blossoms. Oh, get up, dear friend, my fair and beautiful lover—come to me!"

The title Song of Songs is a Hebrew idiom like the Holy of Holies or King of Kings, it's a Hebrew way of saying the greatest thing, so this is the greatest song of all songs, the love song of love songs. God's love song is the Song of Songs.

The poem moves in the symphonic cycles, like a tennis match with themes like seeking and finding. This couple CANNOT wait to find each other! The woman goes out looking for her lover

and more than once they'll find each other and embrace and, right when things seem to get racy, the scene will suddenly end and a new one will start and they're separated, and they're looking for each other, and on it goes.

Another theme is the joy of the couple's physical attraction to one another, so multiple times they'll pause and describe each other in elaborate metaphors. One of the key metaphors is expressed in the line, "Love is as strong as death. Its passions are as severe as the grave. Its flashes are of fire, a divine flame. Many waters cannot extinguish love" (8:6). Like Bruno Mars singing "Too Hot! call the Po-lice and Fireman, Don't believe me just watch" or Good Friday's hymn "My Song is Love Unknown."

Rivers cannot sweep it away. The poem highlights the power and intensity of love, both beautiful and dangerous; like fire, love can destroy people if it's abused or be life-giving, if it's protected. Ultimately love expressed insatiable human longing, to know and be fully known and desired by another. Love is one of the most transcendent experiences in human life. As part of the bible's wisdom tradition, this book says that love is a gift from God. There is an unresolved open ending to the book Song of Songs, which is a lot like life, not ever completely resolved, and like love; because there is always more to discover and pursue in your beloved and so true love has no end and neither does this book.

There's a key feature that sticks out as we read the book as part of the OT. The overwhelming use of garden imagery. There are powerful echoes of the Garden of Eden, idyllic scenes between the married couple in the early chapters of Genesis, the man and the woman, naked, what we might think of as vulnerable, though clearly they feel no shame, they are completely at ease with one another, unified and safe with one another. This resonates in the background of the Song of Songs. It's as if we are experiencing the love of a couple that is untainted by selfishness and sin. It's beautiful and it's pure. Is this not God's love for humankind? Is this not a picture of Christ's love for the Church, you and me, pure, forgiven, free to grow in a forever relationship?

Nobel prize-winning author Francois Mauriac devoted a considerable amount of space in his book *What I believe* where he wrote, as an older man, on the subject of lust. Mauriac explained, "Old age being a period of redoubled testing because the imagination in an old man is substituted in a horrible way for what nature refuses him." Mauriac dismissed most of the arguments in favour of sexual purity he had heard in his Catholic upbringing: 'marriage will cure lust' – nope, sexual attraction continues. 'Self-discipline can master lust' - but the tidal wave would be powerful enough to bear away his best intentions. 'True fulfilment can be found in monogamy' – a teaching which can be true but wandering eyes can still be there in monogamy. In the end, Mauriac could find only one reason to be pure, and that is what Jesus presented in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). In Mauriac's words, "impurity separates us from God. The spiritual life obeys laws as verifiable as those of the physical world...Purity is the condition for a higher love – for a possession superior to all possessions: that of God. Yes, this is what is a stake, and nothing less."

Terry Wardle asks in his book *Outrageous Love, Transforming Grace*: “Did Jesus have to behave? Did Jesus fight to suppress a deep desire to rebel against what was pure and right so that he could behave appropriately? Scripture gives us the answer and it is no, no, no. Jesus was pure and spotless from the inside out (1 Peter 1:9)...He did not act loving, He was loving. Jesus did not behave with kindness, He was kind.” I find this truth enormously appealing - Christ’s character and how as a believer I can, “participate in the divine nature and escape corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Peter 4:1). This statement is helping keep me pure and transforming my thinking: “I am seated with Christ in heaven.”

Dianne and I celebrated our 36th wedding anniversary this past week. Thinking about the love poem from the Song of Songs and Jesus’ teaching on purity as I prepared my sermon this week, reminded me to ask Dianne what song we danced to at our wedding reception. She emailed me that it was Amy Grant’s 1981 song, *My father’s Eyes*, about God’s love filling us, purifying us in the way we see others, showing compassion and care for one another. My wife Dianne has shown this characteristic, consistently for 36 years of our marriage. Amy Grant sang and we danced: She's got her Father's Eyes

Her Father's Eyes
Eyes that find the good in things
When good is not around
Eyes that find the source of help
When help just can't be found
Eyes full of compassion
Seeing every pain
Knowing what you're going through
And feeling it the same
Just like my Father's Eyes

Finally, long-time parishioner Mary Long, passed from this life earlier this month while I was on vacation and Associate David presided at her celebration of life. David related a story the family had told him, that before Mary died she said that she saw Jesus by her hospital bedside. She told her family that Jesus was saying, “It’s time to come home.” Mary told Jesus she wanted to say goodbye to all her kids and grandkids. When they’d all been to see her, Mary Long, in her 91st year, a champion badminton player, tennis player, active member of this parish, a believer in Christ, went to be with Jesus. This is love, by the bedside, love from the heart, a pure love God had given her, love for God, for her family, for her community, for her church. Is it so hard to believe that it is God who seeks us as our lover and we his beloved?

Maybe all the desperate seeking and finding, the running and leaping of the lovers in Song of Songs, cherishing one another and longing to be near one another that the Beloved and the Lover express, the waiting til its time to consummate their love, is met in Jesus, who makes the love a pure one, over the years of loving, the choice to believe, to love, to belong to Jesus and not to be ashamed.

A song based on the two verses from the Song of Songs: “I am my beloved’s and he is mine, his banner over me is love.” Oh, the goodness of God. Amen.