

“Love In Action”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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Song of Solomon 2:8-13
James 1:17-27

I’m gonna just come out and say it: Song of Solomon is the sexiest book of the bible. You may not think that’s saying much, considering most of the sex written into the bible you have to read between the lines to catch its euphamistic meaning, like when Ruth “uncovered” Boaz’ feet, or when Adam “knew” Eve and she conceived.

But here in Song of Solomon, there are 8 chapters of love poetry. Today we see the speaker’s beloved bounding over the hills; to her he is a leaping stag. He stands by her wall, hoping to catch a glimpse of her through the window. And this is no peeping Tom; she welcomes his visit, calling him “my beloved.” He calls to her to rise, and come away with him. He announces the end of winter, the appearance of flowers, the voice of the turtledove, figs bursting forth and vines bearing fruit. Clearly, the awakening of love for the narrator reflects the bounty and fruitfulness in nature’s spring. It seems it is not just a secret the two will enjoy, but something that all of creation rejoices in and participates with as well. It is really quite spectacular.

Many through time have wondered why, exactly, Song of Solomon was included in the bible. Scholars don’t even think that King Solomon, the book’s namesake, wrote it. For that reason, a lot of scholars simply call it Song of Songs. Religious leaders throughout time have made the book decidedly un-sexy, by saying it is an analogy of Christ’s love for the church. The way I see it, though, this book’s delightful inclusion in our sacred texts shows that there is a place in our experience as people of God, made in the image of God, for the enjoyment of pleasure and the mutual sharing of love. We could leave it at that, and I would happily call it a day.

But a key point I want to share with you today from Song of Songs is that the shared love and desire between two people **call forth action**: they plan a future where they can be together. There is a reason so many songs are written about love. When you love someone, romantically or otherwise, have you ever felt that love has helped you encounter the world with more wonder and generosity? The experience of loving, and being loved, can fill you with creative energy that causes you to share something of yourself with the other person, or even with the world. For example, the Taj Mahal was built by Emperor Shah Jahan as a testament to the love he had for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, after she died while giving birth to their 14th child.

But the kind of love that gives beyond itself doesn’t have to be romantic in nature. Kai and I were houseguests last week, for 6 days in the home of people we don’t see that often-- in fact, Kai had never met them, and it’s been several years since I had seen them on a regular basis. Yet their invitation for me to come stay with them as I took a spiritual retreat was genuine, and so we went. It’s a weird thing to share a home with new people after being conditioned so long

for social distancing-- especially with people you don't even know that well. And yet, their amazing warmth and hospitality melted over any awkwardness, as we shared amazing food and exchanged stories that ranged from funny to smart to vulnerable. Instead of wanting to go into severe introvert mode after my time with them, which I sometimes do after being around people for concentrated bits of time, I found myself dreaming of how I might share hospitality so generously. I even ordered the cookbook where Izumi found some of her favorite recipes, so we'll see how that goes.

It occurred to me that perhaps one of the reasons people are treating each other so poorly these times in this country is that we have missed out on the bridge-building that happens when people have these kinds of sharing exchanges-- especially when we can share with people we aren't used to being around.

In her essay, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," writer Audre Lorde says, "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference."

Jahmal Cole grew up on the outskirts of Chicago, and at times growing up bounced in and out of homelessness.¹ He attended a school that was low on resources and even lower on hope. As a high school senior, he went to his high school guidance counselor to ask about colleges. His counselor told him to forget college; that his best hope was to graduate from high school, and learn a trade at a vocational school. Instead, as he walked out of the counselor's office, he tore a page out of the thick college selection guide outside the counselor's office. He applied to every college on the front and back of that page. He got accepted into one: Wayne State College in Nebraska. And so, he went there. And if that was the end of his success story, it would be a good story. But it wasn't the end.

Jahmal ended up in Chicago. He began running 3 miles everyday in his neighborhood in Chatham-- once an enclave of a thriving black middle class, it is now troubled with gang violence. But by running, he makes an investment in his block and the blocks around him. He talks to neighbors and finds out about their lives and hopes. This propels him to action, in the voting booth or volunteering. When he began volunteering at the Cook County Jail, he noticed that the kids in jail would often talk about "My 'hood, My block... but they never talked about the city of Chicago. Turns out, many had never been to see the Sears Tower, or swim in Lake Michigan, or visit the Art Institute, or walk in Wicker Park. And so, he created a youth empowerment organization called "My block, My hood, My city. Not only did he want to expand these young people's sense of connection and belonging to the larger city; he also wanted to help them and those beyond the 'hood to see the beauty and dignity of the black neighborhoods around they called home. The teens of his organization sometimes organize tours for the city police to come in their neighborhoods. They want the police to look beyond the boarded up shops and fast food and check-cashing joints with bullet-proof glass; as the teens show the

¹ I heard Jahmal Cole's story while at Chautauqua Institution, from a lecture on Resilience by journalist Evan Osnos.

police around, they point out, “Over there, that’s the house where Martin Luther King stayed as a guest when he was speaking in Chicago.” And “The house on the corner? That’s my grandma’s house! She keeps an eye on all the little kids from her front porch, and prays for them as they come and go.” “The three guys who stay in this apartment building play music on the stoop every Thursday night.” The hope of the teens who lead these tours is that now, when police respond to a call in the neighborhood, they aren’t just looking at people as potential criminals, but they have the compassion to see the beauty beyond the blight, dignity beyond decay, the bonds of love that try to loosen and heal the bindings of oppression.

Love gives birth to action. If you love someone, it’s nice when you can just bask in that love. Sometimes we need that. But love also propels us to do something for our beloved. If all I wanted to do was to bask in Chris’ love, that would be nice... for a day. But eventually, it would be nicer if I also cooked *and* did the dishes, and asked her about her day, and gave her a very strong backrub. I’m not earning her love when I do these things, but I am making our experience of love a tiny bit more spectacular, just as she does in many ways for me.

The Epistle-- or letter-- of James tells us we need to be doers of the word, not just hearers. The great reformer Martin Luther called James “a book of straw” and thought it was erroneously included in the biblical canon. It wasn’t Song of Solomon that Martin Luther wanted to remove; he wanted to remove the Epistle of James! Martin Luther taught that we are saved by the grace which comes from our faith, not by actions. That is to say, we can’t earn God’s love or salvation by our good works. And so James’ tiny letter-- which insists that “faith without works is dead”-- irritated Luther greatly.

I think that while Luther was basking in the grace of God’s love, he was missing out in sharing some of the things that makes that love more spectacular. I don’t think the two ideas-- grace, and good action-- are mutually exclusive. What Luther missed is that James’ letter is not a procedural document for what you must do to get into heaven; it is more like a kind of a love letter, written by someone spilling over with love for God, wanting to respond in ways that will “care for orphans and widows in distress.” It is because of the grace of God’s love that we are compelled to do good action. Not as a way of earning our way into heaven, but because acting for justice and compassion is simply the natural response of receiving God’s love.

Now I know you don’t have to be a Christian or believe in God in order to have good action. Did you hear that Harvard now has a chaplain, Greg Epstein, who is atheist? His book, *Good Without God*, argues that you don’t have to believe in a God to be a good and moral person. I completely agree, and I know many wonderful, good, and moral people who have no religion.

But what I have chosen is a relationship with God-- and I think God has chosen to be in relationship with me as well, and so I am interested in what fruits come from that encounter. I hope you *have* had an experience of God’s love before. But if you haven’t, try first remembering simply an experience of being loved-- whether by a parent, a mentor, a lover, or a friend. Know that that experience of love has something of God in it. Start there, and see what it gives you. Maybe there is actually something spectacular in there. Know also, *you* have love to give, and

God is in that love and can help you share it in spectacular ways as you put it into action. It is a holy act to put that love into action. Sometimes, it is true, our human ways of loving can prove less than spectacular. But thanks be to God, there is no shortage of generosity of the love we are given through Jesus Christ. So, what is one small or big thing you can do, to take that love into action, and make it spectacular?