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Song of Solomon 2:8-13

## EMBODIED LOVE

Song of Solomon is not what most people expect to find in the Bible. This unusual book of the Bible celebrates human bodies and specifically erotic love. In this book two young lovers take turns expressing their ardent love for one another and describing in sensual and suggestive terms the beauty they find in each other's bodies. In other words, Song of Solomon is about sex and human sexual desire.

And the part we read today is actually one of the tamer portions. Who knew the Bible could be so racy! Maybe after today's sermon there will be a *sudden* interest in Bible reading as the congregation runs home to dig out that Bible from wherever it is stashed and flip through the pages in search of Song of Solomon!

Down through the ages, the Christian Church has not known what to do with this erotic literature in the Bible. And so Church leaders reinterpreted the Song of Solomon and told the faithful that this book was an *allegory*—an allegory of God's love for the people of God. Christians were taught that when these passages from Song of Solomon speak about breasts or lips or navels or thighs or the great many euphemistic references to "vineyards" and "gardens," they were not describing the physical domain of the body but were instead extolling the sacred beauty of the *spiritual* domain of God's love. When confronted with all that arousing language, believers were effectively told to "quick, close your eyes and think about something spiritual."

But most modern scholars have moved away from such interpretations. Rather, most scholars believe that this book is exactly what it appears to be: a series of songs about sexual desire.

In some ways the Christian Church down through the ages has talked too much about sex. And in other ways, the Christian Church hasn't talked enough about sex. In its history the Christian Church focused narrowly on sex and sexual expression as the ultimate sin. Rules were imposed. Bodies—especially those of women—were shamed and denigrated. And people grew to think of sex as something necessary for procreation but otherwise dirty and shameful.

The irony of the Christian Church's moralizing against sex cannot be missed since the Christian Church in its many forms and traditions has an extensive history of sexual misconduct and discrimination—it's history of abusing children and women, and its history of excluding and oppressing women and sexual minorities.

Song of Solomon opens up a different conversation about sex—an often neglected conversation within the walls of the Christian community. Instead of sex as shameful or embarrassing, Song of Solomon celebrates the human body and its desires. And as we read this book we make some significant observations.

The first is the recognition that a woman's voice dominates the book. A man's voice is also heard in these songs but, as in the passage we read today, it is most frequently the woman who sings about her love and desire. We are more accustomed to women's voices being overlooked in biblical literature—but not here. Here the woman is neither shy nor submissive but rather she is both bold and assertive in declaring her passion and in pursuing her lover.

We also observe something else in these songs: we are shown a love marked by mutuality and fidelity. The relationship between the man and the woman appears egalitarian with neither dominating the other. And there is unquestioned faithfulness. They have eyes for no one else but one another.

And the other observation that is so evident is the unabashed joy that pervades the songs. These lovers are filled with joy and delight in their love, in their bodies, and in being alive together.

And perhaps that explains why long, long ago, those who were deciding which pieces of literature would be part of the canon and would thus be included in the Bible, perhaps that explains why they chose to keep Song of Solomon as part of our sacred scriptures. This book is a testament of joy for God's good creation. It is a reminder that our physical bodies are beautiful. We live in a society so saturated with sexual images but lacking in examples of love that is filled with mutual joy, faithfulness, honor, and respect.

Song of Solomon offers us a window into better understanding the incarnation—the belief that in Jesus, God became human. Jesus was clothed in one of these bodies. As that line from the Christmas carol “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” states, “Pleased in flesh with us to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.” God is pleased with human flesh.

Song of Solomon reminds us that God created something good in the human body and that human love occurs not in spite of our human bodies but *within* our human bodies. For humans, love is not conducted abstractly. We come in bodies. And it is through our bodies that we express love in all kinds of ways.

The pandemic made using our bodies to express love far more difficult. Imagine the impossibility of Song of Solomon in an age of a pandemic. Why the lovers would not be allowed within 6 feet of each other! Nor did the pandemic permit people to visit loved ones in hospitals and nursing homes. It kept grandparents from hugging their grandchildren. Instead of standing at the bedside and holding the hand of one who was sick or dying, pastors had to stand outside in the bushes and shout their prayers through a crack in the window.

And yet, people still found ways to share their love—through drive-by celebrations of graduates, and front porch concerts, and communion elements delivered to homes, and phone calls to check in on one another.

And technology helped for sure. Zoom became the way we reached out in love, holding family gatherings on computer screens, worshipping remotely. During the deepest days of the pandemic, I heard some of my colleagues express their delight in the usefulness of technology in doing ministry, with some declaring that the use of online worship was “just as good or even better” than those carried out in person. Look at how many people we can reach through technology, they would say.

But do not be fooled! While technology has been a treasured gift in this pandemic, allowing people to carry on with work and ministries, allowing families to stay connected, allowing people to still attend worship, while technology is indeed a gift, *it is not just as good or better than being in person*. Our bodies matter. Our physical presence is essential in connecting with one another and in expressing love. Working from home may be convenient, but something is lost when colleagues are not in the same physical space with one another—and I’m not just speaking about work productivity. I’m talking about the intangible ways that being physically present with our bodies in the same space fosters connection, offers opportunities for expressing care and love. When you need to have a meaningful conversation with someone, you don’t just email them. You don’t just call them. You meet them for coffee or for lunch. You sit across from them and are physically present. There is a meaningful connection that is made when two volunteers work side by side at the food pantry. There is a crucial value gained when sitting together in a sanctuary, singing the songs with our bodies in the same space, coming to the communion table with those we love and with those we struggle to love. Bodies matter.

Some in our worshipping community must continue to rely upon technology to join us. And we want to continue to offer online worship for those who need it. We have plans to improve our online streaming even further. But for those joining us online who are healthy, who are able-bodied, I encourage you to find a worshiping community with whom you can be physically present. Show up with your body. Allow others to be physically present to you and allow yourself to be physically present to them. Bodies matter.

Bodies matter to God. God didn't just tell us we are loved. God didn't send a hologram of Jesus—a disembodied testament of God's love. Instead, God *became* a body. God became one of us and lived among us and delighted in this gift of the body.