

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 19, 2021

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
C: Amen.

Scripture Readings

Song of Songs 8:6-7

Set me as a seal upon your heart,

 as a seal upon your arm,

for love is strong as death,

 jealousy is fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire,

 the very flame of the Lord.

Many waters cannot quench love,

 neither can floods drown it.

If a man offered for love

 all the wealth of his house,

 he would be utterly despised.

James 3:13 - 4:10

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

Mark 9:30-37

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

Hymn: LSB 851, Lord of Glory, You Have Bought Us

1 Lord of glo - ry, You have bought us With Your
 2 Grant us hearts, dear Lord, to give You Glad - ly,
 3 Won - drous hon - or You have giv - en To our
 4 Lord of glo - ry, You have bought us With Your

life - blood as the price, Nev - er grudg - ing for the
 free - ly of Your own. With the sun - shine of Your
 hum - blest char - i - ty In Your own mys - te - rious
 life - blood as the price, Nev - er grudg - ing for the

lost ones That tre - men - dous sac - ri - fice;
 good - ness Melt our thank - less hearts of stone
 sen - tence, "You have done it all to Me."
 lost ones That tre - men - dous sac - ri - fice.

And with that have free - ly giv - en Bless - ings
 Till our cold and self - ish na - tures, Warmed by
 Can it be, O gra - cious Mas - ter, That You
 Give us faith to trust You bold - ly, Hope, to

count - less as the sand To the un - thank - ful
 You, at length be - lieve That more hap - py
 deign for alms to sue, Say - ing by Your
 stay our souls on You; But, oh, best of

and the e - - vil With Your own un - spar - ing hand.
 and more bless - ed 'Tis to give than to re - ceive.
 poor and need - y, "Give as I have giv'n to you?"
 all Your grac - es, With Your love our love re - new.

Sermon

Today's reading takes us to what could possibly be described as the most awkward book of the Bible for some people, one that doesn't seem to fit with the mental image people usually have about the Bible and its contents. For those of you who don't know, this year we've been following a lectionary that has a reading and sermon from each of the 66 books of the Bible over the course of one year, and today brings us to this book which is, in fact, a song.

Sometimes it's called Song of Songs, sometimes Song of Solomon. The title at the beginning says this: "The song of songs, which is Solomon's." "Song of songs of Solomon" is a mouthful, but "song of songs" is just the way Hebrew talks about something being really intense: like the "Holy of Holies" in the Temple just means "the most holy place," I guess "song of songs" is "the song-iest song" or "the best of all songs."

But of course, the reason why (to some people) it may not seem to fit with the rest of the Bible is its content: it's a pretty sensual, even erotic, poem. Solomon presumably knew something about that subject, since we're told in 1 Kings that he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. A lot of that is probably more political than anything else -- you formalize a treaty between two nations by a royal marriage. But nevertheless, as Mel Brooks once put it, "it's good to be the king." We heard Solomon's words from Ecclesiastes just two weeks ago, as he speaks with the voice of experience about all that this world has to offer.

This is a book that has multiple levels of meaning. On one level, it's a work of art in its poetry that anybody could appreciate, even apart from its connection to the Jewish or Christian faiths. Some of the imagery is a little funny to us three thousand years later: guys, try telling your wife that her hair is like a flock of goats or her cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate. I don't know how she'll respond, but I'm not sure it's worth taking the chance. Still, while there's a cultural disconnect with the details there, I think people of just about any time and place could understand the basic sentiment behind it.

In a social or a relational sense, it's a reminder that this is part of how God made us. Evil and unhealthy uses of sex are glorified and promoted by the unfaithful world, and even among professing Christians it is all too often misused -- nevertheless, despite humanity's sin, it is an inherent part of our humanity and was how we were created in the beginning: male and female, meant for each other. Adam finds no companion suitable until Eve, and when he first sees her, he exclaims "At last! That's who I've been looking for!" One of the very first commands God gives to humanity is "be fruitful and multiply."

So it's something well within the Church's responsibility to talk about, because of the many unhealthy and un-Biblical attitudes there are. The society around us often says you should feel free to do whatever you want, with whoever you want, whenever you want. But the New Testament, on no less than fourteen different occasions, refers to self-control as an important Christian virtue and a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Within a Christian worldview, "I want to" is not a good reason for doing something. There are plenty of Bible passages devoted to what not to do, but this book is more unusual in giving a picture of the positive side, the way in which romance and the love between a husband and wife is a blessing from God. Outside of the context God intended, it often causes enormous evil and suffering, but within God's plan there is joy.

Indeed, both themes are present in this book: the joy and passion of love for each other, but also a number of cautions about being virtuous, or as it says at one point, "not to stir up love until it is ready." All Christians are called to the virtue of chastity: for unmarried people, that means remaining celibate; for those who are married, it means being faithful to their spouse.

Love is a universal part of being human, even a necessary part of being human. Love is part of God's nature and therefore it is ingrained into Creation itself. But through humanity's sin, like everything else in our world, love has become distorted. We could almost frame all of human history through that point of view, at how proper and Godly love has been corrupted, distorted, and broken. Our goal as Christians is to put love back together in the way God tells us it is meant to be: in brotherly love and friendship, in romantic love between spouses, and in Christ-like love above all.

Today's particular passage uses that romantic language, the kind of love as strong as death and fierce as the grave, fiery and passionate. It sounds more at home in a story like Romeo and Juliet than in talking about Christ's love for his Church, and yet it also says it flashes "like the very flame of

the Lord." The way we can put back together humanity's broken understanding of love is through Christ. Human civilization around us certainly praises and emphasizes love: all you need is love, the Beatles told us. "Love is love" we're told, unbound by any gender or number or limit of any kind.

But they are wrong in what they believe love means, because they are working with a definition that does not include Christ. The only way to understand love is by what Scripture says about it, and the only way to understand Scripture is with those Christ-colored glasses, that lens that brings everything into focus. And that is what led the Christian Church, among many preachers and theologians, and over the course of many centuries, to see a deeper spiritual meaning behind this book, this Song of Songs.

Yes, it is about romance and love between a husband and wife. But it is also about God's love for His people. All four of the Gospel books, as well as 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Revelation all point us to this, the illustration of Christ as the groom and the Church as his bride. Even in the Old Testament, similar language is sometimes used about the relationship between God and the Israelite people. There is a very real Scriptural sense in which our earthly marriages are an imperfect reflection of the true relationship between Jesus and the Church, and that our faith in Christ must teach us how to live in relationship with each other if we are to do so in the right way.

This relationship is defined by love and honor and respect, but most of all by unity. Ephesians chapter 5 quotes Genesis, "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh," and tells us that this applies also to Christ and the Church. By faith, we are united with Christ so closely as to also become "one flesh" -- after all, the Bible calls the Church "the bride of Christ" but also "the body of Christ" and that makes sense when put together with this unparalleled unity; his bride is like his own body, to be loved and cared for just as carefully as a person ought to care for their own good health and well-being.

"Love as strong as death, jealousy (or passion) as strong as the grave." That depth of love and kind of passion describes Christ's love for us as well, going to the extent of death on the cross and into the grave for the sake of that love. There is nothing that can quench or drown God's love for His people, a priceless treasure. This is the love that sent him into death and the grave, and it is the love that defeated death and the grave for us. The love of God ensures we are united with Him so closely that even death itself could not separate us from Him.

Solomon also writes, "set me as a seal upon your heart and upon your arm." A seal is not just a way to close something up, like the glue that seals an envelope; it's also a signature. The king's seal has his name or symbol on it, pressed into clay or wax to mark that document as his own. A seal on his beloved's heart and arm is the same thing, and we are all sealed by God and marked as His. 2 Corinthians 1 says exactly that, that God has placed His seal on us to mark us as His own, and Revelation shares that image of God's people sealed with His name on their forehead. This seal is baptism, as we baptized Anne this morning: the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit placed on each of us and His seal covering us, uniting us with Him, marking us as God's beloved.

I want to finish with the words of an ancient Christian pastor named Ambrose, who speaks better than me: "Christ is the seal on the forehead, the seal in the heart -- on the forehead that we may always confess him, in the heart that we may always love him, and a sign on the arm that we may always do his work. Therefore let his image shine forth in our profession of faith, let it shine forth in our love, let it shine forth in our works and deeds so that, if it is possible, all his beauty may be represented in us."

Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.

P: O God, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, grant us humility and childlike faith that we may please You in both will and deed; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C: **Amen.**

All: I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: **Thanks be to God!**

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: **Amen.**