

¹⁰ My beloved speaks and says to me: ‘Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; ¹¹ for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. ¹² The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtle-dove is heard in our land. ¹³ The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. ¹⁴ O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

"Love" - March 13, 2011

The Song of Solomon is not one we hear very often, and I bet there are few here who have ever read it straight through before this congregation began our travels through the Grand Sweep program. But when we do something like the Grand Sweep, when we covenant to read through the Bible in a year, it means we read these sections that previously we may have only heard about or heard snippets from, but never looked at as a whole.

The Song of Solomon is a love poem. A song of two people deeply and passionately in love with one another. The Song of Solomon was considered so racy that for years Hebrew boys were not allowed to read it! It is a book of the Bible filled with innuendo, allegory, and intensity. Reading the Song of Solomon, it is easy to see how deeply these two people feel for one another.

Now, granted, some of the allegories have probably lost a bit in translation over the time. For instance, ladies, how would you feel if the love of your life

looked deep into your eyes and said, "Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing, all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved." It would just melt your heart wouldn't it? Okay maybe not. Like I said, some of these metaphors just don't pass the test of time. But later, when he says, "You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you." That line...that line still works!

The Song of Solomon, often just called the Song of Songs has stood the test of time and is in many ways unique from all the other books of the Bible. It is the only book to have all of its words come from the mouths of its speakers. God never appears in this book, it appears to be entirely secular in nature, with no theological or moral implications. And yet, here it is, wedged right in between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah. People must have thought it was important, must have felt that future readers would need to study it. Why? What did they think this Song had to offer?

I am one of those people who almost always has to have music on in the background. I'm not always paying attention to what it is, and I often don't care what I am listening to, I just need to have the background noise. When I am writing I will often listen to the soundtrack to the Broadway musical "Sunset Boulevard"; not because I think it is a wonderful musical or anything, it is simply

the idea of writing while listening to a musical about bad writers appeals to me. I'm a little twisted that way. So when I was writing this sermon and needed background music, I decided to make a playlist of all the songs in my iTunes library that had the word "Love" in the title. I got One Hundred and Forty-eight songs! Almost ten hours worth of music. There were songs from every genre and artists all over the map style-wise. Everything from Alabama to the Ramones, Neil Diamond to Green Day, Casting Crowns to the cast from Glee.

And the topics of the songs took a wide range too. Think about it, we use the word "Love" a lot don't we? We say it to spouses and family; parents and children. But I also love my car. I love going to the Renaissance Faire, I love watching the TV show "Castle", and I love eating gummy bears. But when we say things like that, when we use "Love" in that context, are we saying the same thing as when we say we love our family? Of course not. In English we use the word "Love" in many different ways.

In Hebrew, the language in which our reading today was originally written, they have three completely different words for relationships between two people, all that have been translated as "love". The first is the word *Raya* (*pronounced Ry-Ah*). *Raya* means a kind of bond between two people that allows them to connect so well. *Raya* could almost be translated as soul-mates or really good friends. My wife and I were good friends long before we ever started dating. Long before

either one of us even thought about dating the other person, we were finishing each other's sentences and just clicking as if we had known each other a long time. That is Raya.

The Hebrew's also had the word Dod (*pronounced doud*) that has been translated as "love". Dod is the passionate side of a relationship, the fire, the physical desire that a person feels for another. That is one of the ways the word love is often used in the Song of Solomon, which is why they wouldn't let the Hebrew boys read it until they were older. But in the Song of Solomon, they use the word Raya as well. Two very different meanings, both translated into the same English word.

The third term used in the Song of Solomon, and the one used in modern Hebrew as well is Ahava (*ah-hava*). Ahava is the desire for someone, not physically, but with your heart and your mind. I don't know how many of you married couples out there were friends first, but Ahava is the feeling you have when you realize you don't want to be just friends with this person, but you want to spend every waking moment with this person. That is Ahava. That is Love!

The preacher Rob Bell, has talked about this subject, and he believes that to truly love someone, you need all three. To truly love someone with both body and mind, with both heart and soul, it takes all three; Raya, Dod, and Ahava. He believes that when you have all three, you will have love that burns so bright it can

never be extinguished! And that is the kind of love that is talked about in the Song of Solomon. That kind of love, that kind of intensity can be a scary thing at times. I mean let's face it, people coming to grips with that fear, and with that love is the basis for most romantic comedy movies. This is why in the Song of Solomon, there is a repeated refrain that says essentially, "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem...do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready!"

This kind of love makes me think of one of my favorite poems, a sonnet by William Shakespeare:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Now when Billy Shakespeare says, "Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds", he isn't saying that love doesn't change. What he is saying in this poem is much the same message that Rob Bell gave, and that is that Love, real love, doesn't just go away.

The book Song of Solomon is about true love. The kind of love that lasts forever. This book, I feel, is in the Bible for the very real reason that we need to understand how deep and how intense Love can be. If for no other reason than so that we can better understand verses like John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." For God so Loved the world. For God so loved each and every one of us. Ahava. Love.

God loves us, just as we are. With all our imperfections and insecurities and all our faults, God still loves us! And if and when you mess up in life, God is Still going to love you! God's love is eternal and unwavering. God's love alters not with brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom. This is the Good News of the Gospel. This is one of the greatest messages that Christ has tried to teach us broken down into three words; God Loves You.

We are now in the season of Lent, the season of preparation and introspection leading up to the day of Easter. Last Wednesday night was the Ash Wednesday worship service, and we performed the imposition of ashes for those who were there. The ashes that we use are created by burning some of the palms that we wave on Palm Sunday here at the church. Palm branches that we wave in Celebration of Christ, to show our love for him, are burned, and reduced to the ashes that we use to begin the season of Lent.

I am not a big fan of giving up something for Lent, though I know that many do. I am certainly not a fan of the people who use Lent as another layer of encouragement to stay on their diet. I am, rather, a person who likes to add things during Lent, and for this reason, I want to put forth this idea for you.

The Song of Solomon is not a monologue. It is not one person professing their love for another the way many poems and songs are. Rather, it is a duet. It is two people professing their love for each other. Two people engaging in conversation and speaking of their love for the other.

During this season of Lent, I ask you, take a moment each day and tell God why you love him. Think about all the ways God has shown that He loves you, and spend the season leading up to Easter thinking of ways to show God your love in return.

Amen.