

Human Sexuality: Part 2

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series: Live Faithfully

Song of Solomon 4:9-16

“The minister mentioned sex 64 times. I’m never coming back to a Presbyterian Church again!”

A mother with two young sons worshipped with us last Sunday. They are active in a local Baptist church but attended Vienna Presbyterian for a baptism. This unsuspecting mother and her sons were present to hear the first sermon in a series of five messages on the topic of human sexuality. As I began the sermon, her eight-year-old boy kept whispering, “Mommy, what’s sex.” This is not a question that can be answered satisfactorily in a sentence or two during a sermon. Her ten-year-old son had a more visceral reaction. When the service concluded, he said to his mother, “The minister mentioned sex 64 times. I’m never coming back to a Presbyterian Church again!”

Parents, if you find this message too intense for your children, you have my permission to excuse yourself anytime during the course of this sermon.

Last Sunday, I preached from the opening two chapters of Genesis. I made three points in the sermon. First, God created our bodies good. Second, God created us sexual beings. Sex, after all, is God’s idea. Third, God created sex for marriage.

I also mentioned that one doesn’t read very far into Genesis before encountering “the fall.” Adam and Eve disobey God and fall out of relationship with God.

One of the resulting effects of sin is the disorder in their sexual lives. The rest of the Bible is essentially a commentary on how God restores order to our disordered lives.

I invited you last Sunday to call or e-mail me on this important subject. I’m grateful many of you took me up on this offer. Most of you expressed appreciation that we are willing to tackle this important subject in sermonic form. Some of you expressed how difficult and painful it was to listen to this sermon and anticipate the remaining sermons. I heard from single people, wondering if they will ever experience the kind of intimacy described in Scripture. I heard from married people, wistful that they are not experiencing the sort of intimacy and delight expressed in Genesis. I heard from widowed and divorced people, mournful about the loss of love.

We are devoting two sermons to the Song of Songs, one of the least known and most misunderstood books of the Bible. It’s unlikely you’ve ever heard a sermon from the Song of Songs. Michael Dudit, editor of *Preaching Magazine*, has been accepting sermons for inclusion into his magazine for the past 20 years. He doesn’t recall a single sermon submitted from the Song of Songs in the last 20 years.

Jews and Christians alike are uncomfortable with the provocative

God has spoken through the Song of Solomon to celebrate human love, as well as cautioning us about its alluring power.

sexual imagery of this book, so they seek to interpret it allegorically. Jewish rabbis expound on this book as an allegory of God's love for the people of Israel.

Christian scholars have rendered it an allegory of love between Christ and his church. Bernard of Clairvaux, a highly acclaimed priest from the 12th century is a case in point. He preached 86 sermons from the first two chapters of the Song of Songs and never once mentioned sexuality!

There is nothing in the song itself to suggest it is anything other than an anthology of love songs. God has spoken through the Song of Solomon to celebrate human love, as well as cautioning us about its alluring power.

How did this book end up in the Bible? God's name is never mentioned in the song. Although most Old Testament books are cited in the New Testament, Song of Songs is never referenced.

The title of this book is "The Song of Solomon," or alternatively in verse 1, "Song of Songs." The phrase "Song of Songs" is a literary expression, along the lines of the superlative song or the best song of all. There is considerable debate about its authorship. We cannot tell for certain whether it is written by Solomon or about Solomon or dedicated to Solomon.

Song of Songs is a compendium of love songs expressed between a woman, identified as the beloved, and the man, labeled the lover. The woman wastes no time in expressing how she feels about this man: "Kiss me with the kisses

of his mouth, for your love is better than wine!" (1:2). She desires to be smothered with kisses. This woman is the dominant presence in the story, which is rather interesting, since it is written during a time when, ordinarily, men would have initiated the relationship. Two-thirds of the verses in the song are attributed to her. The man is largely silent until the 4th chapter. Her love poems comprise much of the first three chapters. By sequence, her male counterpart is slow to emote! Why am I not surprised?!

I asked myself several times this week why I chose to preach from the 4th chapter of the song. Admittedly, this chapter is awkward to read, let alone interpret. I feel as though I am reading a couple's private love letters.

Throughout the chapter, the man employs highly suggestive language—agricultural, architectural and zoological images—to describe his beloved. He begins by extolling her eyes, which are like doves (4:1). Later in the chapter, he returns to her beguiling eyes: "You have ravished me with a glance of your eyes" (4:9). In contemporary language, we might say this guy is a goner!

He likens her white teeth to a flock of shorn sheep (4:2). He seems especially pleased none of her teeth are missing.

Her cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate, and her neck is like the tower of David (4:3-4). Men, don't try this at home!

Her two breasts are like twin fawns (4:5). Those who interpret

God in His wisdom placed the Song of Songs in Scripture to provide us with a positive, life-affirming sexual ethic!

Song of Songs allegorically really have their work cut out for them in these verses. They interpret the two fawns as the two stone tablets of the law or the Old and New Testament. Somehow I don't think so!

The language becomes even more evocative at the end of the chapter when the man speaks of the woman as a locked garden and a sealed fountain (4:12). He, in essence, praises her virginity.

If you are put off by these graphic references, let me remind you, I didn't write this song! It's in the Bible. God, in His wisdom, placed the Song of Songs in Scripture to provide us with a positive, life-affirming sexual ethic!

The Song of Songs is altogether unique in the annals of Scripture. Love is arguably the most important dimension of human life. Yet we lack meaningful vocabulary to articulate its mysteries. Along comes Song of Songs to the rescue! The Song of Songs, by all accounts, is a literary masterpiece.

The language of Song of Songs is highly suggestive, yet remarkably restrained. It's not at all pornographic. Pornography leaves nothing to the imagination. It reduces people to mere bodies. Performing sex for its own sake, without regard to our souls, must be terribly boring. We are bodies and souls together.

We have a bifurcated understanding of the human person today. When it comes to religion, we believe our souls really matter and our bodies are relatively unimportant. Song of Songs affirms

that our bodies matter to God. We will explore, in coming weeks, what the Apostle Paul has to say on the matter. Our bodies are a temple where God resides through his Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

I said last Sunday that God created sex for marriage. Song of Songs celebrates sexuality as an expression of married love. Five times in our lesson the man refers to the woman as his bride (4:8, 9, 10, 11; 5:1). That's why the New Revised Standard Version makes the interpretative decision at the outset of this poem that the woman and man are bride and groom. The song extols the virtues of sexual love in the context of an exclusive, committed marriage relationship. That's the ultimate in safe sex! God intended marriage to be a haven for safety and security. The fact that it doesn't always turn out that way doesn't mitigate how God intended it.

Song of Songs has something vital to say to single people as well as married couples. The song issues a warning to any who are drawn to love's powerful allure. In the second chapter, when the bride addresses the daughters of Jerusalem, who are likely a chorus of single women attendants at her wedding, she declares, "Do not awaken love until it so desires" (2:7). This verse is repeated three times in the course of the song (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). It runs like a subtext throughout the book. In other words, do not compel love. Don't force the issue. Wait for the real thing. Let love take its natural course.

Sex, as God intended it, is beautiful. It's worth waiting for!

Sex, as God intended it, is beautiful. It's worth waiting for!

There are several times in this story when the woman goes looking for love (3:1-5; 5:2-8). Some of you may be seeking love. You may like to meet someone to love you as much you would want to love them. Our song does not decry looking for love, but it warns us not to settle for something less than the best. Bryan Wilkerson says in this regard, "It's better to be single and looking for love than to rush into a relationship and miss the real thing."

There is a considerable amount of longing in this song. In the two prolonged dream sequences, this woman pines for her lover. Our longings for love will never be perfectly fulfilled by another person. I wonder whether the poet includes these words to warn us not to expect more out of love than it can possibly deliver. No one else can perfectly satisfy us. How can any imperfect person perfectly satisfy us? Perhaps the song deliberately refrains from mentioning God as a literary device, to heighten the suggestion that God is the one for whom our souls yearn. Only God fulfills the deepest longing of our souls. Maybe that's what the allegorists are trying to tell us. God loves us passionately.