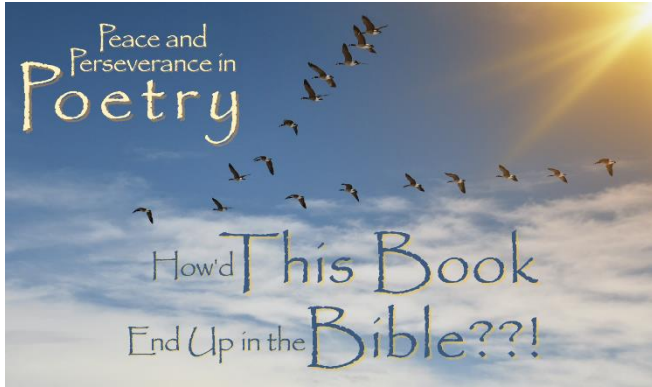




A SERMON

by Rev. Marcella Auld Glass: August 25, 2025



I PREFER SONG OF SONGS AS THE TITLE FOR A FEW REASONS. First, Solomon had nothing to do with the composition of these love poems. They were written long after he had lived, loved, reigned, and died. But in the first verse of the first chapter, it says, “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s. This follows a custom for literature at the time to be attributed to famous figures from the past.

But the main reason I prefer the Song of Songs title is that the repetition of the title also follows a tradition in scripture. The Holy of holies. The king of kings. To say it is the Song of Songs is to speak to its place in literature. This is not just some love poem. This is the love poem of love poems. Rabbi Akiva, when talking

about why this book should be in the Hebrew Bible, wrote, “The Song of Songs is the holy of holies.”

And lots of love poems and songs have been written since this one. I invite you to think about your favorite, and maybe your least favorite, love songs. Because love is the emotion we can’t stop thinking of, can’t stop wrestling with, can’t get enough of, and always need to be reminded of.

*You’d think that people would’ve had enough of silly love songs
But I look around me and I see it isn’t so
Some people want to fill the world with silly love songs
And what’s wrong with that?
I’d like to know
‘Cause here I go again*

That, of course, is a line from one of my least favorite love songs by Paul McCartney when he was in Wings. But here’s what he said about it, which makes me hate it a little bit less:

“There were accusations in the mid-1970s—including one from [John](#) Lennon—that I was just writing ‘silly love songs.’ I suppose the idea was that I should be a bit tougher, a bit more worldly. But then I suddenly realised, that’s exactly what love is—it’s worldly. ‘Some people want to fill the world/With silly love songs.’ I’d been given that reputation, and I had to stand up for it. Instead of abandoning songs about love, just get on with it, get into it and don’t be embarrassed, because even though you might say this is a soppy subject, it’s actually the opposite: this thing people can feel for each other that makes life better. I think that’s the crux of it, and if you want to be cynical, it’s easy, you can. ‘Love doesn’t come in a minute/Sometimes it doesn’t come at all.’ I think a lot of people who are cynical about love haven’t been lucky enough to feel it.”¹

May we be people who love, who sing silly love songs, and who show love to the world God created in love. Let us worship this day in joy and with love.

Song of Songs 2:10-13

*My beloved speaks and says to me:
Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtle-dove
is heard in our land.
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.*

8:6-7

*Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,*

¹ <https://www.beatlesbible.com/people/paul-mccartney/songs/silly-love-songs/>

*a raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love
all the wealth of one's house,
it would be utterly scorned.*

THIS WILL BE A DIFFERENT SERMON than you may often hear from me, because this entire book of the Bible, from which we just heard two sections, has zero mention of God, God's covenant with humanity, or references to other scripture. Anyone remember the other book where God doesn't make an entrance?

(Esther—ding ding ding!)

The poem narrates an intense, poetic love story between a woman and her lover through a series of sensual dialogues, dreams, metaphors, and warnings to the "daughters of Jerusalem" not to awaken love before its time. What you heard today is from some of the more G-rated passages.

It has beautiful and evocative language. Scholars aren't entirely sure when it was written, but it is one of the newer books of the Hebrew Bible, based on its language and phrasing. It was probably written in the 4th century BCE, but was certainly written before the Puritans showed up, because we know they would never have allowed it.

For much of Christian history, and for much of Jewish scholarship before we showed up, this book has been read allegorically. Not as the erotic poetry that it is, but as an allegory for how much God loves us, or for the relationship between Jesus and his church.

You can read it that way if you want to, but sometimes an erotic love poem is just an erotic love poem.

And in truth, I am not sure I need to get that close to Jesus. You know? If one were to write an allegory about how much God loves us, I would skip a lot of the language that is in this book. I don't know that I want God's love for us to be so sexual.

And maybe that's part of our problem. It is in reading a book like this that I realize how much of a puritan I am. Most of the time I feel like a liberated, modern woman. Then I read this book and hear all the voices I internalized as I grew up that tried to teach me that sexuality was dangerous, or bad. Definitely not something to write poems about and put in the Bible. I start clutching my proverbial pearls.

It's a problem we're still untangling. I suspect I am not the only one out there with conflicted internal messages about sexuality, and beauty, and desire, and attraction.

We come from a long line of puritans. And it started way before the puritans, even though they are fun to blame for our hangups. That's why both Jewish and Christian traditions have allegorized the book away from a face value reading of this poetry.

What does it mean for us to have this book of love poems in scripture?

We, as Presbyterian flavored Christians, believe that all scripture is inspired by God, meaning that God breathes into all these words that humans have written and named as holy. We believe that God is still speaking to us today through these words. And it means that God wants us to see love poems as holy. That human love is holy.

There's a lot of things that call themselves love in today's society that don't measure up to the love God has for us, and wants us to have for each other, and the love God wants us to have for ourselves.

One of the things I appreciate when I read Song of Songs is that each of the lovers appreciates the beauty of their partner. And they appreciate the beauty that is in their own self too. And so, if God has inspired this poetry as scripture, and made it God's Word for us, we need to reconcile with how we love each other, and love our own bodies, and love our very selves.

Because God is who made us. In a few weeks, we'll hear from the Book of Genesis that God created humanity and called their creation good.

Do we see our own bodies as God's beautiful creation? I suspect I'm not the only one who could work on that.

You may not know this about my past, but I used to belly dance.

It started because one year on Epiphany, the word I drew on my star was 'adventure.' And I wasn't going to jump out of an airplane to find adventure, and so I was trying to find another way to add more adventure into my life. And a friend asked if I wanted to go to a belly dance class with her.

My first thought was, 'hell no.' Because it terrified me. And I started looking up companies that would help me jump out of an airplane instead.

But I said 'yes' to that terrifying adventure. And let me tell you that dancing in a room full of people in front of a floor to ceiling mirror was not for the faint of heart. But after I had been feeling like an uncoordinated buffalo in this room full of beautiful gazelles who could dance, and afraid that they were all looking at me in the mirror and wondering why on earth I had come to the class...about halfway through the class, I realized that none of them were looking at me. They were all focused on getting their own hips to shimmy correctly and not worried about me at all.

And that was very liberating.

The other thing I discovered in belly dancing was how disconnected I was from my body. Before dance, I used to have a body. It carried my brain around, which was its primary task. It enjoyed a good meal. It enjoyed some pleasures, for sure. But before dance, I'm not sure I was ever fully present in my body. I once ran a half marathon and did a triathlon, but those activities were largely motivated by a desire to lose weight so I could continue to eat what I wanted.

Belly dance gave me an appreciation for being embodied. Dancing is fun. It can also be maddening and frustrating, but overall, it is just plain fun. And there is gift in perseverance, in practicing week after week and finally seeing change as your brain and body work together to learn new things.

I used to spend more time than I want to admit in wishing I had another body—a less voluptuous body, a smaller waisted body, one with better knees. The animosity I felt toward my body contributed to the disconnect I felt between my self and my body, I'm sure.

But to dance, you have to ask your body to do new things, to do difficult things. *Why would my body want to do that for someone who loathed it and wished it were something else?* Dancing helped me appreciate the 'skin I'm in' and taught me to love and appreciate my embodied self.

Your relationship to your body may be different than mine, but I suspect we all have, or have had, complicated relationships to the skin we're in at times.

The way people read the apostle Paul is part of the reason I think we have hang-ups about sexuality in the church. And for good reason. But Paul also says this in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."

For me, this reminder that God created us and our beautiful bodies, and that our bodies are meant to be used to glorify God—that has big implications. For how we treat ourselves. But for how we treat others, maybe even more.

Song of Songs is a conversation between people who love each other, and who see themselves as worthy of love. It reminds us to see the beauty in each other and in the people we don't know, the rest of the people God made in love.

Because each and every person you'll ever encounter was created by and is loved by God. **And who are we not to love what God loves?**

God created the people our government is detaining without due process, in inhumane conditions in detention camps. And God loves the people God has created. **So who are we, not to love the people God loves?**

God created our unhoused neighbors. And God loves who God has created. **So who are we, not to love the people God loves?**

The passage from chapter 8 is one of my favorites:

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love
all the wealth of one's house,
it would be utterly scorned.

The speaker is asking her lover to tattoo her name on their heart, to tattoo it on their arm. A reminder that love is stronger than death. It's permanent, like a tattoo.

Human love, we know, has challenges. But God's love for us is permanent. So we pray for relationships that can weather and adapt across the challenges and changes of life in way that mirrors God's love.

This section of the poem also evokes the combat stories of some mythological Middle Eastern deities. *Love is a battlefield*, as theologian Pat Benatar once said. In the Hebrew, the words for death, grave, flashes of fire, raging flame—those words all recall stories of how Ba'al descended to defeat the god of death.

I point that out to remind us of the stakes of love. To the grave and back is where the battle for love is being waged. It is cosmic, mythic, and eternal.

And I see that in the way people love. Because love can take us to the heights and to the depths.

*"Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm"*

Sometimes that seal is a pretty tattoo of a heart encircling a lover's name. But sometimes the seal looks more like a scar.

I have a friend who got a tattoo after his teenaged son was killed from a car accident. At the time he talked about how his life, his heart, had been permanently marked because of Greg's death, and so it made sense for his body to be visibly and permanently marked too. The tattoo was on his calf, but 'set me as a seal upon your arm' fits here. For love is strong as death and many waters cannot quench it.

Over the years, as a pastor, I've been privileged to accompany families at the end of life. And whether the person has lived a long life, where death feels like a welcome friend, come to give them rest, or if death seems an unwelcome visitor come too soon, what I see the most at the end is love, and the way it remains as everything else burns away. The disagreements and differences that get in our way are set aside at the bedside of a dying loved one. Because it is love that is as strong as death.

I still think the Song of Songs is just a love poem, and was not written centuries before Jesus was born to magically allegorize the way Jesus loved us.

And I also see why the church, over the years, has used it as an allegory.

Because, in the person of Jesus, God embodied their love, God put their love into a human body, and was born to a woman, was nursed, cared for, loved, and raised as one of us. In Jesus, God loved us all the way to the cross, willing to sacrifice themselves to show humanity that the systems of domination and death are not as strong as the love of God.

In Jesus, God showed us that love was stronger than death, rising on the third day and bringing peace to his scared and defeated disciples.

How are we going to show love? Love to each other. Love to the people who are hard for us to love. Love to our own selves. We see the absence of love all around us, so may we be agents of God's love, that people may be reminded of the power of love too. May we carry love as a seal in our hearts and on our bodies.

And while I never ever thought I would someday quote Burt Bacharach in a sermon:

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing, that there's just too little of
What the world needs now is love, sweet love
No, not just for some, but for everyone

Write a silly love song. Give some sweet love to the world. Amen.