

“The God of Passionate Love”
Rev. Brooks Berndt
First Congregational United Church of Christ, Vancouver
May 15, 2011

Dramatic Presentation of Scripture

Song of Solomon: Act I

Selections from Chapters 1 and 2

Male: My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En-gedi.

Female: Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves.

Male: As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens.

Female: As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men.

Male: "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 turtledove 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."

Song of Solomon: Act II

Selections from Chapters 3 and 5

Female: I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; Making their rounds in the city the sentinels found me; they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls. I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him this: I am faint with love.

Song of Solomon: Act III

Selections from Chapters 8

Female: My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to pasture his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.

Male: 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.

Female: O you who dwell in the gardens, my companions are listening for your voice; let me hear it. Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices!

Sermon

The Song of Solomon has inspired me recently. Indeed, it has given me a flare for writing romance. It has brought out my inner Danielle Steel. In fact, this morning I would like to share with you the plot outline for what I am sure will be my first bestseller. The story begins with the protagonist falling in love. It's love at first sight. The two quickly become a pair. It's as if they were meant to be. They have date after date in which they stare into each other's eyes connecting soul to soul. But! Sadly, the conventions of society and their family force them apart. Alone and in despair our protagonist learns of a village that has different conventions and will allow the couple to reunite, if only our protagonist can reach the village. Alas! Our protagonist does make it to the village and the couple rejoices in their love. But! The couple faces one final test: the village will not survive and flourish unless they can get the rest of society to change its conventions. The protagonist works with the village to develop a plan. With much effort and sacrifice, they endeavor to carry out the plan. They face obstacle after obstacle and setback after setback, and at times, it looks as if the village and all of society are doomed. But! This village of love finds the strength and courage it needs. They discover they have what it takes. The couple is saved! All of society is saved! Love wins!

Now, I am going to guess that in an open and affirming church like ours it occurred to a few of you that this story is a story about marriage equality or LGBT rights. It could be, but to be honest, I initially came up with this story a few weeks ago when I was preparing to co-lead a workshop in Seattle on faith communities confronting the problems of coal pollution. I was asked by my co-leaders from Earth Ministry to give a few introductory remarks on some theological foundations for addressing environmental

issues. I don't consider myself an expert in this field, but I relented. I had read a book a few years ago that I thought might help me give an overview of some ideas. It's a book by Tom Hayden called *The Lost Gospel of the Earth*. Now, the thoughts I am about to convey might sound a bit academic, but bear with me. Hayden's book talks about three different models in the Bible for how humans can relate to the natural world around us. Hayden argues that all three can be found in the book of Genesis and that one of these models is better than the others.

The first model is that of dominion. By divine mandate, humans are to rule over the earth like lords. Hayden argues that this model encourages humans to have an abusive relationship with nature. Think of a tyrannical king ordering his armies to subdue and plunder the earth. The second model is that of stewardship. We are stewards ordered by God to take care of the world around us. Hayden thinks this model is better than the dominion model, but it's still problematic because it implies a hierarchal relationship with nature. Think of a benevolent king with a court of barons and baronesses who have a paternal love for the subjects in their care. The third model is the one that Hayden endorses, and that is the model of kinship. It involves thinking of nature like we would think of a brother or a sister with whom we have a close caring bond. In this model, we are all members of God's family. Think of a land where there are no kings and no subjects. Think kumbaya. Think of everyone and everything living together in perfect harmony under the happy roof of our cosmos.

I know some people who really like this idea, and I like it as well. I wouldn't knock it. Still, I'll be honest: It doesn't get me that excited about caring for nature. It just doesn't work for me completely. It doesn't quite speak to my experience of nature. I

like a little more passion, a little more zest, a little more love. So I knew I was going to have to think of another metaphor. It appeared as if the book of Genesis might not have what I was looking for, so I decided to look elsewhere. I looked to that book in the Bible that is so full of graphic love and romance that some preachers carry it around in a brown bag hoping not to offend. This morning I only gave you the parts rated PG. The other parts get a bit steamy. Nevertheless, I think it's time we reclaim this book of ecstatic love poems.

What recently drew me to this book is the way it uses images from nature. If you notice, when the author really wants to express the depths of love and how beautiful the beloved is, the author uses images taken from nature. There are the blossoms of the vineyard, the eyes that look like doves, the lily and the apple tree. When humans think of love, we often think of nature. Perhaps, it is because nature represents beauty in its purest and best form. Perhaps, it is also because the beauty of nature can evoke feelings of ecstatic awe and delight that are not unlike the feelings of romantic love.

With this in mind, I want to re-tell the story with which I began, but this time we are going to unpack that story as an allegory, as a giant metaphor, and I want you to imagine yourself as the protagonist. Your story begins with you falling in love with mother nature. It's love at first sight. For some of you, it might be a week at summer camp as a child, for others it might be a hike or a family trip to the beach, for still others it might be time spent right in your own backyard. Whatever the case, the bond is indelible and only deepens over time. You have date after date. Perhaps, one is at a waterfall in the Gorge. Another is among the tide pools of the coast. Another is along the waters of Crater Lake or Lake Chelan. Whatever the case, each encounter reaches into the

depths of your soul adding to your joy and passion. But then! Sadly, the conventions of society in the form of pollution, waste, and greed begin to get in the way of your romance. The object of your love and affection becomes threatened and abused. You find yourself alone and in despair. In the depths of doom and gloom, however, you learn about a village that lives according to different conventions. In this village, you can repair your bond with mother nature. This village is a community that cares. It cares about how certain habits, practices, and policies are bad for the environment. It's also a community that lives according to different values than the rest of society. In fact, this community is a lot like this wonderful, fabulous church!

In this community, your relationship with mother nature blossoms once again. You have wonderful dates hiking on trails and starrng into the magnificent rush of waterfalls. Everything seems absolutely blissful! But! We must face one final test. That final test is one of the most daunting tests humanity has ever faced. It's a test that involves the melting of glaciers that provide drinking water for hundreds of millions of people. It's a test that involves increasing droughts striking at the some of the most critical food basket regions of the world. It's a test that involves the rise of the sea level over cities, islands, and farmlands. It's a test that is making the ocean more and more inhospitable to species after species.

To confront this final test, we are going to have to work with others to change the conventions of our society, to fight pollution, waste, and greed. Despite the daunting size of this problem, our love is strong. It motivates and sustains us. It gives us courage and hope. With nagging doubts about the world but a deep sense of faith in the power of love, we team up with others who share our values and convictions. We develop a plan

to change the rest of society. With much effort and sacrifice, we carry out the plan.

Along the way, we face giant obstacles! We experience huge setbacks! But! Eventually

the tide turns. Eventually, our beloved is saved! All of society is saved! Love wins!

The Spirit of God rules over our collective heart! Together we rejoice! And lovers

throughout the land exclaim, Amen! Amen! And amen!