

# Worthy of Love

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Pentecost 15

September 1-2, 2018

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

September is here. Evidence is all around us that summertime is winding to a close. It's getting dark by 7:30 p.m.! For almost everyone, school is in session. And the cicadas are in full volume. This weekend we remember and celebrate Labor Day. We give thanks for the gift of work, for being able to use our energy, skills, knowledge and passions to contribute to society. We let our lights shine to reflect God's good intentions. We give thanks for our work and the work of others.

Technology has completely changed our culture and the way we work, just about everywhere, for just about everyone. Certainly church work is different! How we celebrate, invite, and welcome people to share in the Promise and Presence of Abundant Love has to keep up with the times.

Over the years one thing that has changed is the number of church weddings. This year it looks as if there will be only two! Caitlyn and Royce in May, and Kolette and Matt in November. In my thirty-eight years of ministry, this is a record low! Destination weddings and weddings in what we call "off site" venues are way more popular. And nowadays a friend can get an officiant license online easily. Years ago when this trend started I wondered... will I soon be out of a job?

Not yet! So far it feels as if there is lots of work to do! There are still baptisms and funerals. It seems there is a lingering hope that there is something to the promises of God.

Here, we celebrate our lives together, from the beginning to the end. Babies, children, and adults are baptized in our font, which is pretty close to the garden courtyard, and the columbarium. The promise of new life continues and goes with us.

And we make promises along the way. Promises that can be hard to keep. We need all the help we can get.

This coming spring, Ed and I will be traveling to Australia, where our son Alex and his fiancée, Ellen, will be married at the Bamarang Bush Retreat near the coast. We will leave early springtime here and travel to the Australian autumn. We are happy and look forward to all of it!

We start our autumn season with the final reading in our semi-continuous lessons from the Old Testament, the Song of Solomon. I have really enjoyed this time. It's been super fun to have the opportunity to study and reflect on the old stories, to look for themes of presence and promise, and to see the golden threads of connection in the stories of

Samuel, the worried judge; Saul, the sorry king; David, the Shepherd, Slinger, Warrior, and Monarch; and finally David's son Solomon, the Wise, Builder King who prayed for a listening heart, but didn't always pay attention to what he heard.

The theme of our summer has been *HESED*; God's steadfast and faithful love. Holy HeseD held the stories of these ancient people together and grounded them in hope.

Our lesson for this weekend is much different from the others. The Song of Solomon, also known as the Song of Songs, is a collection of poetry. The name of God is not even mentioned. Sometimes couples choose this reading for springtime weddings. I've read the verse, "For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone" during a downpour!

The poetry is of human love; it follows a relationship from courtship to commitment. It was probably written in the fourth or third century, BCE. Throughout the years, the Song of Songs has been read allegorically, as God's love for Israel, for the Jewish people, and Christ's love for the Church, for Christian people. In the twelfth century St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote eight-six sermons along these allegorical lines! He urged his people to leave room for mystery and presence.

Certainly the biblical texts come alive in many ways. But this literature is best taken literally: As poetry celebrating romantic, human love. The poems are provocative and sensual; they delight in and celebrate love. Some of the poetic images don't always transfer! Such as, "Your nose is like a tower of Lebanon! Your hair is like a flock of goats." These are Hebrew compliments!

The lovers in the poems are enthralled; they seek each other and call each other "beloved." Later, in verse 16, the young woman, who speaks seventy-five percent of the time, affirms, "My beloved is mine and I am his."

There was much debate about whether to include this book in the sacred scripture. But it's good that they did. We need these old love poems of mutual love, commitment, and intimacy. Music, movies, and media so often tell other stories of love that are distorted and abused. Human trafficking, child marriage, kidnapping, assault, and disrespect are too commonplace.

We need a song that sings boldly of true, mutual love.

This is a good ending for the summertime series on Steadfast Love. We are loved in order to love.

Brene' Brown is a popular author and speaker. Maybe you've listened to her TED talks. Brown is a social worker, teacher, and researcher. In her research on "wholehearted living," she conducted interviews related to love and belonging. Through the interviews she realized *that only one thing* separated the men and women who felt a deep sense of love and belonging from the people who seemed to be struggling for it.

## **That one thing is the belief in their worthiness.**

Our sense of worthiness—that critically important piece that gives us access to love and belonging—lives inside our story. The greatest challenge for most of us is believing that we are worthy right now, this minute. Not when we ... get a better job, get parental approval, better grades, volunteer more, find a boyfriend, get married, graduate, lose weight, feel better, get out more, have more friends ...

## **We are worthy of love. As we are.**

After collecting thousands of stories, Brown concluded that all men, women and children need “a deep sense of love and belonging. We are wired to love ... and belong. When those needs are not met, we don’t function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We hurt others. We get sick.” [1]

The absence of love and belonging will always lead to suffering.

Worthiness matters. Wholehearted living comes when we cultivate courage, compassion, and connection.

**Courage** comes from the Latin *cor*, meaning “heart,” originally meant “to speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart. Having courage means being willing to be vulnerable. We have courage when we speak up for ourselves, speak out for others, and speak the truth in love.

**Compassion**, in Latin *pati cum*, means, “to suffer with.” Our first response to pain is to self-protect. Compassion moves us toward what often scares us. Compassion is between equals, not loser and hero.

**Connection** is the energy that exists when people feel heard and valued, when we give and receive without judgment. When we gain support and strength from the relationship.

The wholehearted journey begins with a willingness to tell our stories, feel the pain of others, and stay connected in this disconnected world. At the heart of wholeheartedness is to trust that we are worthy of love and belonging—right now, this minute, as is.

Steadfast Love, *HESED*, promised so long ago to vulnerable and capable people, lives on in our stories ... in *our* vulnerability, our courage, our compassion, and our connection.

We are like:

**David the Shepherd**, when we care for each other and speak up for those who need our voice.

**David the Slinger**, when we have the courage to trust that God enables us to do what we already have the capacities and abilities to do.

**David the Warrior**, when we are willing to go to battle for what is right. When we are willing to see our own shortcomings and remember that growth comes from struggles.

**David the Monarch**, when we use our power to pursue the wellbeing of others. When we see others not as adversaries but as people like we are. When we are accountable to each other and have the moral courage to trust grace and speak the truth. When we value each other.

BUT! David took Jerusalem by force. David took Bathsheba by force. He covered his tracks by killing off Uriah. He was the man!

He was also the one to whom the unbreakable promise was given. Steadfast, faithful love, would continue through David. No matter what. It is with David that Messianic hope was established.

Like David, we are complicated and we cover up. We are vulnerable and inconsistent.

Like Solomon, we pray for a listening heart, literally...“to be inside as a family in a tent.” To pay attention to each other.

Storms are strong and can take down our tent. We lament our losses, disappointments, and failures. Our lament leans into trusted love. We are grounded in hope when we ask, “Given where I am in my live, how can I build that best possible future?” Posttraumatic growth is possible.

Wednesday evening at the 5 B’s BBQ fundraiser, tables in the Sanctuary Hall were filled with tasty looking desserts. Pies and cakes, bars and cookies. I’m reminded of the phrase, “Life is uncertain; eat dessert first.” Our summertime lessons would say, “Life is uncertain; trust love first!”

The political scene continues to be heated and hostile. Young lives are cut short by violence, neglect, and addiction. Depression debilitates and disease devastates. Families flee for safety and hope. Still, children are separated from their parents. Weather is dramatic and dangerous; too hot, too cold, too much rain, or not enough. There are so many ups and downs, so much murder and mayhem, disaster and drama. It can all seem so futile.

Later in the Song of Songs, the poet writes, “Love is as strong as death” (Song of Solomon 5:6, NRSV).

We celebrate human love in our commitments to each other in marriage, friendship, and families, in community and in the congregation. We remember ancient promises given at baptism when we were named and claimed as BELOVED.

Even though there will only be two weddings here this year, there is still pastoral work to do! Thank goodness!

Recently I read an article in *The Christian Century*—a periodical I have been reading since before there was voicemail—that warmed my heart. According to recent research, girls who have had a direct example of clergywomen in childhood grow up with higher self-esteem, better employment records, and more education than girls who did not. The research indicates that when girls have had a female clergy at least in some time in their growing up, their later reported levels of self-esteem are consistently as high as men's, even though women generally report lower levels of self-esteem. In the survey, a gender gap in psychological and economic empowerment is present only among those whose religious congregational leaders during their growing-up years were exclusively men.

Life together in a faith community begins with an invitation to friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service—like a new women's circle, 21&Over, signing up for helping with God's Work Our Hands next Saturday.

We make friends, join a group, enter into romance because this person, or these people, bring comfort and joy. Our hearts are lighter. These people make the world more interesting and bearable.

When we join in, our hearts lead the way. [3]

The Steadfast love we lean on—Holy *HESED*—holds our stories. Together, we are grounded in the lingering hope that there is something to the promises of God, promises of love and belonging.

Our wholehearted journey of courage, compassion, and connection continues next week and into September as we celebrate the gifts of creation: Earth, Humanity, Sky, and Mountain.

It's another verse in the long love song.

Amen.

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Resources:

[1] Brown, Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*. Simon and Schuster, 2010, p. 40.

[2] "Century Marks: Pastoral Example." *The Christian Century*, August 15, 2018, p 8.

[3] Bass, Dorothy. *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, HarperOne, 2012.

Over the summertime I benefited from many resources, including 1 & 2 Samuel by Walter Brueggemann, different articles from [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org), and from Professors, Ralph Klein and Fred Gaiser.

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