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Song of Solomon 7:1-13
February 25, 2018

How Should I Love You? Let Me Exclaim the Ways

Okay ... that was a little adventurous, wasn't it? Did you even know that there was scripture like that in the bible?

Never fear – it will all make imperfect sense when I am done.

Today is a challenge. On the one hand, it is CELEBRATION SUNDAY where we have just dedicated our pledges and ourselves to God – and that indeed is reason to celebrate.

But we are also smack dab in the season of Lent. And this morning I am going to start my Lenten Sermon series based on Gary Chapman's best selling book, "The Five Love Languages."

Each Sunday we will focus on a different love language – and since there are five of them and we only have five more Sundays before Easter – I had to get started.

This morning I hope to at least make my remarks something we can celebrate.

I want to begin by juxta positioning Valentine's Day (which occurred only 11 days ago) and the Season of Lent.

Upon initial consideration, the two probably seem to be diametrically opposed with no possibility for overlap.

Lent is a time for repentance, solemnity, denial, and introspection. What could that possibly have in common with Valentine's Day?

Valentine's Day is about passion between lovers. Exuberant outward expressions of love for family and friends.

But ... one thing you might have noticed is that Valentine's Day fell on Ash Wednesday this year. First time that has happened in my ministry. Which means that Easter falls on April Fool's Day – another first – but we'll tackle that later.

Strangely, we often give chocolate to loved ones on Valentine's Day. Well that isn't so strange, but it is when sometimes just as often, our loved ones have given up chocolate for Lent.

How did that work for you this year?

So, what does a pastor do when Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, falls on Valentine's Day?

To be honest, I did very little. We had a drop-in Ash Wednesday service that ended at 7 pm and then I took my wife out to dinner for Valentine's Day.

But, why not embrace both Valentine's Day and Lent? Especially since I found this wonderful Lenten sermon series that embraces both, by centering on love?

The author of the Christian faith (that's Jesus, in case you weren't sure) wanted love to be the distinguishing characteristic of his followers.

Do you remember what Jesus said about love? "Love one another. This is how they will know you are my disciples by how you love one another."

So, there you have it – during this Lenten journey we will focus on love and the practicality of how to love one another more fully.

As I mentioned, I will be using Gary Chapman's book, **The Five Love Languages**, as a starting point.

In his book he delineates the five love languages as: **Words of Affirmation, Physical Touch, Quality Time, Receiving Gifts, and Acts of Service.**

Chapman's premise is that we all have different ways we experience love. AND if we know what they are, we can better speak/experience the language of love with our partner.

For example, my love languages are *acts of service* and *words of affirmation*. In other words, when DeLynn says nice things about me or does something caring for me, I feel loved.

Imagine my surprise when I found out that DeLynn's two most prominent love languages were *physical touch* and *quality time*.

Early in our marriage, I thought by complimenting her and by doing nice things for her, she would know I loved her. Sure, she appreciated my efforts, but they didn't speak to her – they weren't her love languages.

And when she spent time with me (when she could be doing something else) or gave me a big hug and kiss – I liked it, but I didn't feel the love – not like when she affirmed me.

Knowing that, it changes the way we show love to one another. We use THEIR love language, not OURS – and it has made all the difference!

If you are a couple and haven't read this book, get it and read it! It also works in all other kinds of loving relationships, by the way.

Okay, enough of an endorsement of Chapman's book.

Today, we look at the love language of **Words of Affirmation**.

Sharing affirmations at the beginning of relationships, particularly romantic relationships, flows naturally.

One comedian describes the stages of love by how one spouse takes care of the other when they have a cold.

In the first year of the relationship:

"Sugar Dumpling, I'm really worried about you. You've got a bad sniffle and there's no telling about these things with all the terrible viruses that are going around these days.

"I'm taking you to the hospital, dear, where I've reserved a private room for you.

"I know the food's lousy, so I'll bring your meals in from *Aquis* and *Mandarin Gourmet*. I've already made all the arrangements."

Second year of the relationship:

"Listen, Darling, I don't like the sound of that cough and I've called the doctor to rush right over. Now you go to bed and I'll take care of everything."

Third year of the relationship:

“Maybe you’d better lie down, Honey. Nothing like a little rest when you’re feeling lousy. I’ll bring you something. Do we have any canned soup?”

Fourth year of the relationship:

“Now look, Dear, be sensible. After you feed the kids, do the dishes and mop the floor, you’d better get some rest.”

Fifth year:

“Why don’t you take a couple aspirin?”

Sixth year:

“If you’d just gargle or something instead of sitting around barking like a seal all night. . .”

Seventh year:

“For Pete’s sake, stop that sneezing! What are you trying to do, give me pneumonia?”

Ah. . . the stages of love! Yes, we do really well with *words of affirmation* at the beginning of a relationship, but sometimes we forget how important affirmation is by the seventh year (or even the second or third).

Our scripture passage today, the *Song of Solomon*, also known as the *Song of Songs*, speaks of two who are experiencing the electrifying, intensifying early stage of love.

The *Song of Solomon* makes a Harlequin romance novel seem mild and tame in comparison.

The book just does not seem to fit with the rest of scripture and it has caused great difficulty for rabbis.

Even as late as fifty years after the death of Jesus, a council of rabbis could not decide if the book was holy or not.

Some thought that the book belonged in the scriptures; others noted that the book was being sung in brothels around the countryside.

Needless to say, it was the last book to be accepted into the Old Testament.

Many Christian theologians have also been embarrassed by the book and have either ignored it or tried to interpret it as a symbol for something else.

Case in point: This is my first ever sermon with the *Song of Solomon* as a text.

What precisely is the problem with the *Song of Solomon*? Is it that we don't understand the book?

No, actually the problem is the exact opposite. We know exactly what the words in the Song of Solomon means – we know the body parts mentioned in this book.

The man describes his beloved's attributes, beginning with her feet and working his way up to her head.

He speaks of some of his beloved's body parts that we don't typically talk about in church and then sensually says, "I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches."

We understand all too perfectly the metaphors he is using. (if you don't, ask Horace Hines later).

And then she responds, "Come let us go into the vineyards and see whether the vines have budded; whether the grape blossoms have opened; and the pomegranates are in bloom.

"There I will give you my love."

We know that she is speaking of a lot more than grape blossoms and pomegranates.

This is more than simply a Sunday stroll in the garden. There is something here that is sweeter than the grapes that produce wine.

There is no doubt that this is an explicit and erotic passage.

So much so, that I'll bet after the service – some of you are going to grab your bible and see just what I'm talking about!

As I've said, this passage is rarely preached from the pulpit and so many ministers just pretend that this book does not exist.

Or as many claim, this book is just a metaphor for the relationship between God and the church.

And you can certainly interpret it that way if you like.

But, in all honesty, I believe that *Song of Solomon* is in the Bible to affirm that sexuality and spirituality are intimately tied together.

So, let's see how well you know your Bible.

Which of the following affirmations are in the *Song of Solomon*? Once I read one that you think is in the book just raise your hand. Here we go:

Your belly is like a heap of wheat.

Your navel is like a deep well.

Your hair is like a flock of goats.

Your teeth are like a flock of sheep.

Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon.

Your kisses are like the best wine, gliding over my lips.

How do you think you did? Believe it or not, all of these statements come directly from the *Song of Solomon*.

Maybe you even used some of these affirmations on your Valentine's Day cards. No? Me, neither.

Now, truth be told, if you told your spouse that her nose is like the tower of Lebanon or that his teeth are like a flock of sheep – you may not have gotten the reaction you hoped for – even though it is biblical.

I am sure those were lovely compliments in that day and age and place – but I don't think it works so well in Silicon Valley in 2018.

But the idea is just as valid. Words of affirmation are biblical and an important part of any relationship.

And for some of us – a primary way we feel loved and respected.

Regardless of whether you are sharing words of affirmations with a spouse, lover, friend, child, parent, here are some guidelines to remember.

Words are important. If “an apple a day keeps the doctor away”, then a compliment a day may just keep the therapist away.

When your loved one does something you appreciate, let them know.

“Horace, I really appreciate you taking out the trash.”

Not, “Horace, it’s about time you take out the trash. The flies aren’t going to carry it out for you.”

Look for your loved one’s strengths and tell him / her how much you appreciate those strengths.

Tone is also important. Sometimes our words say one thing, but our tone of voice says something completely different.

Normally, a loved one will interpret a message by our tone of voice rather than the words we use.

“I love you” said with tenderness sounds very different than “I love you?” with a question mark.

So, pay particular attention to the tone of the affirmation.

Our facial expressions, when giving a compliment, also make a difference.

The following is a quote from a 13th century Sufi poet named Rumi:

“Here is a relationship booster that is guaranteed to work: Every time your spouse or lover says something stupid make your eyes light up as if you just heard something brilliant.”

Great words of advice – especially for the person who responds well to affirmation.

Compliment your loved one in the presence of others. Chances are he / she will work hard to live up to the reputation.

Our words of affirmation help that flower to blossom or as the *Song of Solomon* says, “the vine to bud, the grape blossom to open, the pomegranate to bloom.”

Maybe Valentine’s Day and the Season of Lent have more in common than I ever thought, especially if we let love be our center.

So this morning let us CELEBRATE how much God loves and even affirms us and the opportunity we have to return the compliment by dedicating our tithes, offerings, time, talent, and treasure.

Amen.