

The Seal of Love©

Eph. 1:3-14; Songs 2:10-13, 8:6-7

Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

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There is just no getting around it. This poetic book really is about love – not love as in “love your neighbor as you love yourself” or “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.”

This Song of Songs is about human love – romantic love. It is an expression of the love a woman has for a man with all the desire and longing.

In fact, this little book doesn't even mention God at all. What we have read today is a very modest reading compared to other chapters. If you want to read a romance book, just read Song of Songs.

So who wrote this book and why is it in the Bible?

No one really knows who wrote it, even though it is attributed (like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) to Solomon (King David's son). And that is probably because it is a book of wisdom, and Solomon was known as a very wise man.

But, unlike most of the books of the Bible, it is clearly spoken mostly from a female voice. A female who is not afraid to express her deep longing and desire for the man she loves.

In some places in the book it appears that she is not suitable for him as a wife because of her complexion - she is a black woman, according to chapter 1. And, from many of the descriptions of her surroundings, it seems she must be from a wealthy family.

Don't you really think it's kind of cool that this book comes right after Ecclesiastes – that *skeptical wisdom* book we talked about last Sunday?

And what a comparison to the Book of Proverbs! While we learn a great deal from those wise, pithy little sayings, they are precise in how we should live a rather strict life.

But here is Song of Songs – wild and deep and uninhibited human love at its best! Do you remember when you first fell in love? The passion and the feelings in that early love compares with nothing else.

Some scholars say this book is a sort of healing of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. Their love story began completely uninhibited with no sense of shame, or anything holding them back. They lived together in perfect harmony as mates, and with the Creator, until they allowed temptation to change all that they loved.

But, there is nothing in this Song of Songs that explains why this love is a healing from the sin-struck love of Adam and Eve. It is just that it should be this way for all couples who are in a committed, loving relationship. And that is part of the wisdom of these writings.

*“Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;”* writes the lover, in verse 6 of chapter 8.

In other words, this love is a strong promise, like marriage. It is a contract, a commitment, a covenant. A seal is something that was meant to be used as a signature. If you put your seal on something, you are doing the same as signing your name.

And while this book of love stands on its own as an expression of human, romantic, heartfelt love and commitment between two people, there is a comparison that we can make in regards to Christ.

I love the reading that we heard today from Ephesians. Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, telling the congregation that they belong to God as if they were his own biological children. He declares that, through Christ, we have been adopted into his family. And that we were in God’s mind, and plan, even from the very beginning of Creation.

Reading from the Message, verses 11 and 12, Paul writes: “It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.”

And then, he goes on to say: “It’s in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free – signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit.

This signet from God is the first installment on what’s coming, a reminder that we’ll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.”

And then, in chapter four, Paul goes on to say that we who belong to Christ, should live a life worthy of our calling to follow him – to be humble and gentle, showing for one another a love that is deep and unconditional – as Christ loves us.

I can’t help but think of the Catholic women who are called to serve Christ in a way that is a giving of themselves, taking vows, as in a marriage. Catholic nuns wear a ring that is like that seal or signet that says they have a covenant with Christ. They belong to him.

But, we who are Protestants, are also called into a covenant relationship with Christ.

The language is somewhat similar to what we say about marriage.

In marriage, we hear that the two become one. And in our covenant relationship with Christ, Paul writes: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling." Eph 4:4-6

And then, in baptism, we hear these words that sound so much like what we just read in Song of Songs: "In baptism God claims us, and *seals us* to show that we belong to God. God frees us from sin and death, uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection."

There is that word *uniting*, just as in marriage. We are united with Christ Jesus through our profession of faith, and in our baptism.

And then, there is that very special time, right after the baptism, when the sign of the cross is made on the forehead of the newly baptized and these words are said: "Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

While most of us, who are devoted Christians, do not think of our relationship with Jesus as the same kind of romantic, passionate relationship the woman in Song of Songs writes about, there have been similarities in writings through the years, by Christians about their feelings of love for Jesus Christ.

Julian of Norwich, and other Christian mystics, have written about being in an *ecstatic state or rapture*, as they had visions of seeing Jesus, calling Jesus "*our endless bliss*." (Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Love, 14th century mystic.)

And if you think about it, the Bible uses a word that Jesus felt for all humanity as he made his way to the cross, carrying so much love for us that he would bear great pain and suffering, just to be able to claim us as his own beloved. That word is *passion*. All through Lent, and especially in Holy Week, we talk about, and sing about, the *Passion of Christ*.

Could it be that, while Song of Songs was written with a passionate, romantic love for a lover, we who are the beloved of Christ, are called to show him a passionate, deep, demonstrative love?

Christ longs for us to know him better, as he desires that we should be fully committed to him, trusting him with our whole self – heart, soul and mind.

And, don't we recognize that built inside of us is a longing for something that is so much bigger than we are, as humans? I think that is a "God-longing." I believe just as we

humans long for love from another human, we have an even deeper longing for the one who created us and came to us as Jesus, the Son.

And we know that somehow those love feelings expressed in a romantic love (in Greek, called *eros*) that becomes even deeper as we mature, often becoming the love of very close, intimate friends (*phileo love*).

Those types of love are strongly connected to that unconditional love we have, hopefully in a mature marriage, and surely for our children. That is the kind of love God has for us, and we have for Christ, called *agape love*.

Just as the wisdom of the Songs speak of covenant love – a love that is sealed in commitment, our love for Christ and his love for us, calls us to a covenant; marks us with God’s own seal that says we are His. This love calls us to deep commitment and an unending, eternal love.

Just as two people are united into marriage – “the two become one” – the seal is set upon their hearts, we, through baptism are united into the Body of Christ – The Church, which is often called “The Bride of Christ.”

“There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called
to the one hope of your calling,
one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of all,
who is above all and through all and in all.” (Eph. 4:4-6)

May our love and devotion to Christ grow deeper and deeper through the years and may we rejoice in the knowledge and assurance that we are sealed in love by the one who so passionately loves us – our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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