

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
September 1, 2024 – 15 Pentecost  
Song of Solomon 2:8-13  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Most of us enjoy a good love story, don't we? A story of two people who are drawn together, whose lives are bound up with one another, whose worlds have changed forever because of their love. Often the lovers experience hardships, misunderstandings, and separation from one another, but they are reunited at last in faithful love. The "happily ever after" stories that we love best.

This morning our Old Testament lesson from the Song of Solomon, also known as the Song of Songs, is a few verses of a long collection of love poems. Written three to four hundred years before Christ, this poetry may originally have been used in wedding celebrations. Throughout the book a man and a woman speak to each other and about each other in very sensual language. In the opening verse the woman says to the man, "Oh, give me the kisses of your mouth, for your love is more delightful than wine" (1:1, Tanakh translation). The lovers unite in bliss, as we heard a few minutes ago. They then lose one another and reunite. Throughout, the book offers lavish praise for human sexual love. Incidentally, God is never mentioned in the Song of Songs.

Now, before you all go home to read this interesting book, I should warn you that some of the language is clearly from another time and culture. Most women now would be quite surprised to be told, "How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful! ... Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing" (4:1-2). I think you see what I mean!

In the history of Jewish biblical interpretation, the Song of Songs has been regarded as both human love poetry and as an allegorical description of the love relationship between God and Israel. In the Bible marriage is frequently used to describe the relationship between God and human beings. For instance, the prophet Isaiah speaks to Jerusalem in these words: "For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name" (54:5). And the prophet Jeremiah writes, "The word of the Lord came to me, saying..., 'Thus says the Lord: I remember the devotion of your youth,

your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown” (2:1-2). Another Jewish interpretation is that the lovers in the Song of Songs are God and the individual human soul. Christians have also interpreted the Song of Songs allegorically, as the relationship between Christ and the church and as the soul’s spiritual union with God. Since marriage can be one of the closest of human relationships, it is natural for us to attempt to describe the close relationship between God and our souls in these terms.

God invites us into a love story. The story begins with God’s love for us, with God’s desire to draw us to God, in deep and unending love. Our part is to fall in love with God, and once we do, to be as faithful a God-lover as we can. To extend the marriage imagery we find in scripture, we are called to make a “marriage vow” to God, in the words of The Book of Common Prayer: “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish,” but without any parting at death. Christian tradition teaches that we can love God and love other people – partners, parents, children, friends, neighbors, strangers. Our challenge is to keep our love for others in right relationship to our love for God and not allow other human beings to take God’s place on the altar of our hearts.

Today we are gathered here to express our love for God in worship – in hymns and prayers and by recalling God’s word for us in scripture. Today when I baptize baby Charlie and bless his family, we will celebrate and honor God’s gifts of human love and new life. And today when we participate in the Eucharist, we will once again receive a token of God’s limitless love for us, God’s children. In this wonderful hour together, we rejoice to be part of God’s love story. Amen.