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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Song of Solomon 3: 1-4; 5: 1
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I Want to Know What Love Is

To begin, here are some lines from the ancient Greek poet, Sappho, who Plato once called “the Tenth Muse:”

Some say horsemen, some say warriors,
Some say a fleet of ships is the loveliest
Vision in this dark world,
But I say it’s what you love...
And I recall Anaktoria, whose sweet step
Or that flicker of light on her face,
I’d rather see than Lydian chariots
Or the armed ranks of soldiers.

This past summer I fell into a conversation on the New York City subway. I was there to deliver a talk about love, and my interlocutor, a young woman who teaches Spanish, wondered what I might have to say on the subject. She then recounted an episode she had witnessed not long before: coming out of her apartment building one night, she was startled, and then moved, to find two young people sharing a passionate kiss. She was startled, she said, because she so rarely sees anyone, young or old, sharing displays of affection - of love - so openly. And she was moved because, as in Sappho, it was an act so at odds with the spirit of the times, running so counter to the cruelty, insults, bellicosity and, frankly, stupidity that daily surround us. A kiss seemed nearly revolutionary.

I thought so too. Later that day I gave my talk, about the many aspects of love I had witnessed in Cuban Orisha ceremonies over the years, aspects that can also be found in our tradition. It was, by and large, a chaste sort of love that I lifted up that afternoon, the kind we tend to talk about around here - the love of humanity, or of neighbors, or of members of a community. It wasn’t a vision that ever fully acknowledged something as important, and as common, as a kiss. Nor did I say much about the bliss and madness and sometimes heartbreak that can follow.

Meanwhile, love, with all of its twists and turns, accounts for the plot lines of probably half of the world’s greatest literature - from Homer and Shakespeare to James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. Bookstores devoted to romance alone are springing up right now in cities all around the country. If a television show is not about the end of the world or superheroes or both, it will

probably be about love. Or at the very least, love - the passionate, intoxicating kind - will figure somewhere in the plotline. At some point in most of our lives, usually when we are young but sometimes much later, most of us have been swept into this vortex.

And yet I said little about that kind of love that afternoon in the city. I've said little about it from the pulpit over the years. On the ride home, I wondered why. Is it because our own tradition has relatively little to say about this most human of all experiences? Much of the New Testament, if we are honest, seems antithetical to the kind of ordinary love shared between human beings. Jesus spoke of love, but aside from legends and speculation, there is no indication that he was ever in love. Some of the apostles, like Peter, seem to have been married, but truthfully, the disciples seem far more interested in their male friendships than their wives. And then there's the Apostle Paul. He wrote rapturously about other forms of love - *agape*, say (the love of humanity), or *philia* (the love we have for our friends) and *sorge* (the love parents have for their children). But about the other kind of love, *eros*, where lovers exchange a passionate kiss, about that kind of love, Paul counsels total abstinence. If that proves impossible, well then, he says grudgingly, it's better to marry than to burn. It makes you wonder how churches ever came to celebrate marriage as a positive good at all, or came to bless any kind of physical relationship whatsoever. So maybe we avoid the topic because our tradition just doesn't have much to say about it.

Or perhaps we avoid it for other reasons: because of an ingrained distrust of the body within much of the Christian tradition; or because people tend to behave foolishly, sometimes becoming reckless and destructive when they fall under the spell of love. Perhaps it is the solipsism of lovers, able to see little beyond their own all-consuming passion. Maybe it's because after a while we carry too many wounds from love, too many disappointments, too many heartaches. And so we deflect - we choose to speak about love in general, rather than love in particular. Or maybe the banalities and clichés surrounding love run so thick that we instinctively avoid the topic. Whatever the reason (and I suspect there is some truth in each of those maybes), we in the churches have said little about a human reality that is as common as it is complex, that is as ennobling and elevating as it can be terrible and wounding. Can it really be true that we have nothing to say about the flicker of light on a face that Sappho celebrates, about the lover's sweet step that she anticipates, about a passionate kiss glimpsed outside of an apartment building? Are we so little interested in those revolutions of the heart?

I've thought about those questions a lot for the last several months. They are questions that no sermon can adequately address, though I do hope to devote several more Sundays to exploring the many dimensions of love. Because it's true, I want to know what love is. Maybe you do too.

It so happens that while I was pondering those questions, our year of reading the Bible had us spending several days in the Song of Solomon, a love poem every bit as passionate as Sappho. The rabbis who shaped the canon of the Hebrew Bible saw fit to include that poem, and later, as the Christian canon was taking shape, the Song remained. For that, we can be grateful, because it is one of the few places in all of the Bible that celebrates and blesses this most basic and elemental form of love. It's true, the edges of the Song have been sanded off by many interpreters, who read it as an allegory of the soul's passion for God. Those readings aren't necessarily wrong. But the poem is, first and foremost, about the raptures and intoxication of love - the love of bodies, and not only of spirits.

And so say that we are living in a time in which all sorts of practices of love need to be renewed. Say that the kiss my friend witnessed was a sign of resistance to the despair and nihilism that surround us. Say we are, collectively, starved for love. What might the Song of Solomon have to teach us in this time?

First and foremost, this: that our loves are a school of being that can and do confer upon us many of life's most valuable lessons. The Song is about an ecstatic pair, each discovering that their lives are incomplete without the other. Some people prefer and cultivate solitude, I know, and many others find themselves in that condition involuntarily. And yet there exists the experience of feeling as if life was somehow incomplete without the presence of another, where the self alone proved to be insufficient. I love the depiction we heard earlier in the Song of the lover wandering alone through the streets of the city by night, in search of her beloved, for it suggests an incompleteness that love suddenly exposes within the very structure of one's being.

And who has not undergone some variation of that experience? Art can do this to us, and so can the pursuit of knowledge. Religion can too. But the most common instance occurs between individuals. Love draws one out of the self. It teaches us how to be generous. It shows us how to consider the well-being of another. It teaches us, sometimes quite painfully, how to overcome our most selfish and base instincts. It shows us how to cool our anger, and very often, if love is to last, it shows us how to forgive. Like the woman wandering the streets at night, love unhouses us, sending us on a journey outside of the self that can often feel like moving through the outer darkness.

Second, the Song stands as a rebuke to all the forces and ideologies in our world that cast suspicion on the body, and that fear the many ways that bodies find pleasure. In eight short chapters, it sends generations of puritanical and repressive religious ideologies packing. All the dualisms about the superiority of the spirit or the soul over the body, or of the greater importance of the mind or intellect over materiality, are set aside. As in the later notion of incarnation, of a God becoming flesh, so in the Song we find an unabashed celebration of the body. I'll spare you a description of the very graphic metaphors the Song deploys. But in an era

when much of our lives are conducted virtually, and when our loves are often mediated by screens, the Song, to say nothing of the very idea of a God of flesh, who possesses skin, can feel startling and freeing. I suspect that one of the reasons my friend was so moved by that kiss was for precisely this reason - it was two young people discovering themselves in the flesh, away from a screen. In the era of AI, a kiss may indeed be a revolutionary act of being. The Song returns us to the domain of the human, of bodies in love.

And then this. In the fifth chapter, the Song depicts an agonizing separation. "I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and was gone...I sought him, but did not find him: I called him, but he gave no answer." It is the most painful lesson of love, for sooner or later, our loves do come to an end. A partner moves on. Sometimes we ourselves do. A death occurs. Love's embers cool and die, and no amount of oxygen can restore the flame. When this happens, we are thrown back upon ourselves, forced to rediscover an inner strength independent of the other. Sometimes love sends us back to ourselves at a different level. And sometimes love can teach us how to say goodbye with dignity and with grace.

It is a relatively trivial example, but I well recall how, in the first weeks of college, I caught a ride to another school just a few hours away, where a girlfriend of mine was attending. Ours had been a long distance relationship, and I was excited to be just a little closer to her. From the moment I arrived on her campus, though, it was clear that I wasn't really wanted there. We spent a few awkward hours together on Friday night, and then a tense Saturday with one another. There was no hint of affection. All my attempts at conversation went nowhere. There was little indication that we even knew one another, let alone that we had once cared for each other. I felt humiliated, and heartbroken. It wasn't the first or the last time, but it was one of the instances when I was forced to learn what it means to move on, what it means to wish another person well even at our parting, and what it was to discover a strength within myself that did not depend upon the attention of another. It has been one of love's most difficult, but valuable lessons.

I'd like to conclude by citing another poet, for it is the poets whose ears are most attuned to the secret chords of love. It is a poem in the form of a letter, written by W.H. Auden to his lover Chester Kallman, in 1941. Two years prior, Auden had written a very famous poem called "September, 1, 1939," a poem filled with a bleak despair about the world after the onset of war in Europe. But then Auden fell madly in love, and he underwent a profound change of being, his senses, and his hope restored. Auden wrote his letter to Kallman on Christmas Day, 1941. It is a letter which opens the possibility (a possibility also disclosed in the Song of Solomon) that our loves, in all of their carnality and complexity, are one of the ways we come to know God. Here is what Auden wrote:

Dearest Chester,

Because it is in you, a Jew, that I, a Gentile inheriting an O-so-genteel anti-semitism, have found my happiness: As this morning I think of Bethlehem, I think of you.

Because it is you, from Brooklyn, who have taught me, from Oxford, how the most liberal young man can assume that his money and his education ought to be able to buy love; As this morning I think of the inn stable, I think of you. . . .

Because the necessarily serious relation of a child to its parents is the symbol, pattern, and warning of any serious love that may later depend upon its choice, because you are to me emotionally a mother, physically a father, and intellectually a son; As this morning I think of the Holy Family, I think of you. . . .

Because even les matelots and les morceaux de commerces [i.e., sailors and trade] instinctively pay you homage; As this morning I think of the shepherds, I think of you.

Because I believe in your creative gift, and because I rely absolutely upon your critical judgement; As this morning I think of the magi, I think of you.

Because it is through you that God has chosen to show me my beatitude; As this morning I think of the Godhead, I think of you.

Because in the eyes of our bohemian friends our relationship is absurd; As this morning I think of the Paradox of the Incarnation I think of you.

Because our love, beginning Hans Andersen, became Grimm, and there are probably even grimmer tests to come, nevertheless I believe that if only we have faith in God and in each other, we shall be permitted to realize all that love is intended to be; As this morning I think of the Good Friday and Easter Sunday already implicit in Christmas day, I think of you.

It is hard to imagine writing something like that to one's spouse or partner, and yet it is one of the most powerful declarations of love that I know. It's a letter hinting that maybe, just maybe, we are saved by our loves. It may be a lot to imagine, but it could be that the stresses and repetitions and negotiations of our own most intimate relationships are the theater for our journey toward the Divine. Auden sensed that possibility, and so too does the Song of Solomon.

Back now to Sappho: Not for us, the horsemen and warriors, the soldiers and chariots. And not for us the greed and callousness, the cruelty, self-regard, and bigotry of our age. Sing me a song of love, show me those locked in a passionate kiss, and I will show you something of what it is to have an experience of God.