

What's Love Got to Do With It?

Will you pray with me?

God – God of love, God of heartbreak, God of joy, God of sorrow – squirrel your way into each of our hearts, hardened or open as they may be. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our gathered hearts, be acceptable to you, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Well, I couldn't let this Sunday pass without commenting on Valentine's Day – that critically important Christian holiday.

Just kidding – that mostly capitalist, Hallmark-y holiday. But with some Christian roots to be fair.

Normally, I wouldn't consider Valentine's Day to be a holiday worth marking in Sunday worship... but for some reason, the idea of love has hold of me this year.

Not necessarily that red rose for a special someone kind of love. A much, MUCH more expansive kind of love.

God's love for us. Abundant. Undeserved. Unreasonable.

Our loves for ourselves. Difficult to hold onto some days but so necessary.

And our love for others. A whole lot harder if we haven't first learned to love ourselves. Really difficult if we don't truly believe in God's unbounded love for all of creation.

This kind of love forms the very basis of our faith.

When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

But here's the part Jesus leaves out in this verse – though it permeates the rest of the Gospels and I have no doubt that Jesus knows exactly how beloved we all are – we love God so fully, so abundantly, as A RESPONSE.

God loves us FIRST. Without exception. Without conditions.

God delights in us. In you.

Our souls, each and every one of them, completes God.

And it is that kind of love – unconditional, ever-present, irrational – that we are called to love OURSELVES and others with.

You shall love your neighbor (my addition is human and non-human alike) as yourself.

But you will not succeed in loving your neighbor fully, abundantly, in God's preferred kind of love, if you aren't first able to love yourself in that same unconditional way.

This kind of love, the unconditional kind, my friends, is revolutionary.

So, let's not let Valentine's Day go unmarked. Because this world, so beloved by God, needs a little, or a lot more, love on the ground.

So, love in the Bible.

Song of Songs – eh? Guess it's not all that platonic, brotherly/sisterly, neighborly kind of love that we sometimes imagine as we read the Gospels.

For many centuries, Song of Songs was considered the most important book in the Bible. The most Holy of the Holy is how Rabbi Akiva put it.

And this text – this love poem – racy, erotic, more than a little explicit – has been hashed over by many a theologian. Why is it in the Hebrew Scriptures? Why is it important?

Does it describe God's love for us??

Is it simply a secular love poem between two lovers?

Why does the woman get such a major and equal speaking role here – when in so much of the Bible, women's voices are silenced?

All good questions. But for this morning, know this:

The richness of this text – the joy found in the physical act of love – in the playful discovery of our beautiful, pleasure-ful bodies – is something God approves of.

As long as the participants are consenting adults, with equal power to say yes, to say no – I believe God rejoices whole-heartedly in the pleasure our bodies can give us.

Our God gave us these bodies. We have a responsibility to be gentle with them, loving with them, curious, playful, and respectful. Our own and everyone else's.

To that end, I want to give you a few recommendations.

For your viewing pleasure on Netflix:

Sex Education. If you have a teenager or young adult in your life – really, if you have an older adult in your life – if you ever thought that sex and sexuality might be something you'd like to know a little more about – this is the show for you. Funny, endearing, smart – I bet, it'll teach you some things.

Secondly, check out the episode on female pleasure on Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop documentaries. This isn't really an endorsement for the whole show – but if any of you are a female, or love someone who experiences pleasure with biologically female parts – do yourself a favor and watch this half hour of tv. Actually, that's not even a perquisite. Just watch it!

Now, if you don't have a Netflix subscription: we have some other options. Go see the final showing of the Vagina Monologues at 2 pm in Hood River today. Go read up on the Our Whole Lives curriculum on the UCC website. Or simply read all of Song of Songs a couple of times through.

Church - loving our bodies for the beautiful, powerful, pleasure-ful miracles they are the first step in loving ourselves.

How was that that for an unexpected twist to a sermon?

But seriously, when we are ashamed of our bodies, when we internalize the lie that they are dirty or impure or unworthy – we are forgetting God's love for Her magnificent creation.

God makes no mistakes. And She didn't start with you. No matter what the world tells you.

Hafez, the Sufi poet, is one of my favorites for illustrating God's love for us in all its forms.

God's love for us is unconditional. And playful. It's the love of a lover and the love of a parent. The love of a sibling – the love of a true soul friend. It stands strong whatever we throw at it.

And it's always, always, calling us back to our truest selves.

One of you wise people recently told me about a theme in the books they're reading, "Christ, the Universal Christ, came here to remind us who we are."

Carriers of divine light.

Beloved in the eye of God.

Good, beautiful, worthy – no matter the imperfections you think you have. Your weaknesses and your gifts – all of you – is holy in the eyes of God.

I've thought about telling other peoples' stories of discovering their own belovedness and shining their light in the world. Pick up Gregory Boyle's book "Tattoos on the Heart" for a myriad of these stories.

This morning, I think I can only tell is my story.

I've been fortunate. Born to healthy, engaged, loving parents, I was brought into communities that shared God's abundant love with me at every turn. It wasn't really ever in question.

And yet – I've still struggled to trust my own worth.

Of course, I'm loved if I'm smiling. If I have it all together, if I get along with everyone.

Those sides of me are easy to love! ...so I better make sure I'm only showing those sides to the world.

Because the narrative in my head?

Keep your emotions bottled up. Don't get angry or people won't want to work with you.

Stay aloof – friendly sure, but keep relationships on the surface. Keep your walls up, so you can't be hurt when someone rejects you. Protect your heart from feeling, from loving, so that it won't ever break. Be tough and always be the first to leave so no one can leave you.

Oh, and? You should probably lose 20 pounds so you'll look better in yoga class.

And when I'm all done with that, why don't we turn that judgment outward? Onto the rest of the world?

Oof. It's not pretty.

This narrative isn't one I'm proud of. It wasn't one I was even really aware of until pretty recently. But even without being aware of it, I was trapped in it.

Even with all the love I had been given, I believed love was conditional. I believed I was only worthy when I was my brightest, shiniest self.

There are so many people in this world who have been told over and over again that they are unworthy. That they don't matter.

We have to start loving ourselves fully, so we can love others fully.

So, we can shatter the toxic lie that anyone is any less than beloved in God's eye.

So, we can show by our wide-open hearts that every person, every creature, every bit of creation is worthy.

Friends, living without love creates hard hearts. It's inevitable.

And hard hearts create a hard world. Hard hearts foster impatience, judgment, fear and hate.

Hard hearts look for the kinds of distractions money can bring – hard hearts hunger for instant gratification and ignore the beauty of creation.

Hard hearts wreak destruction.

We can no longer afford to live in a world of hard hearts. It's literally destroying us.

And the only place to start, the only heart we can begin to change right now, is our own.

Open yourself to heartbreak.

Open yourself to God's love – boundless, overwhelming, inexplicable.

Know deep in your bones – in your beautiful body – that you are beloved. That you are worthy.

Proclaim that to yourself every day until you begin to believe it.

Because, only by knowing our own belovedness, only by loving ourselves as God loves us – can we begin to share that much-needed moon language with the world.

Hear these words from Marianne Williamson,

"We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in all of us. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Your love for yourself, your acceptance of yourself invites others to discover that love for themselves.

You are born to be salt – flavorful and necessary.

You are born to be a light on the hill – a light in the world. Shining as a beacon of God’s love for all to see.

On the fifth day, God looked out on creation and declared it good.

Every day, God looks upon you and declares you good. Worthy. Beautiful. Delightful.

A flavorful salt!

The Glory of God shines in you.

Beloved, may you learn to love yourself as God loves you. And then always, always, love others as yourself.

So, what’s love got to do with it? Everything.

Amen.