

## The Gift of Love

**13** If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>[a]</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly,<sup>[b]</sup> but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

## **Song of Solomon 2:8-13**

<sup>8</sup>The voice of my beloved!

Look, he comes,  
leaping upon the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.

<sup>9</sup>My beloved is like a gazelle  
or a young stag.

Look, there he stands  
behind our wall,  
gazing in at the windows,  
looking through the lattice.

<sup>10</sup>My beloved speaks and says to me:

“Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away;

<sup>11</sup>for now the winter is past,  
the rain is over and gone.

<sup>12</sup>The flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtledove  
is heard in our land.

<sup>13</sup>The fig tree puts forth its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away.

## **Song of Solomon 8:6-7**

<sup>6</sup>Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;  
for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.  
Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

<sup>7</sup>Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.  
If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned.

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**Love Poetry... in the Bible**

**Song of Solomon 2:8-13; 8:6-7; 1 Corinthians 13**

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Although last weekend didn't quite happen as originally planned, it ended up being likely just what was needed. Though my husband and I had planned for just about everything but, we both ended up making visits to see our extended families. Chuck ventured to Morgantown to spend time with his parents, after they moved in his 92-year-old grandmother to live with them until she finds a long-term care situation nearby, and I went to Western Maryland to spend time with my parents – who have recently had to manage health concerns – my mother being just over a week out from getting a pacemaker. It has been a time of seeing our families differently, and finding new ways of loving them tenderly.

As Chuck and I were both kids who “moved away,” visiting family isn't always easy. It takes time and effort, and comes now with an awkward dance of shifting roles and responsibilities. This time was particularly hard. Both sets were coming face to face with mortality in their own kinds of ways. Since I was dropped off at my parents and Chuck and Ryleigh traveled on, I can tell you more about my own experience of what that was like. My parents are actively working on all the legal documents in regards to end of life decisions – things like making wills and filling out advanced directives. They are designating who will speak for them if they cannot speak for themselves. And they are preparing as best they can for the possibility of long term care hoping neither one of them has to leave their home any time soon. These are NOT easy conversations – but they are important ones. As the clergy person in the family – they know that I know that. I've told them as much. I've had a will in place since my

early 30's. Maybe that seems strange, but when you deal in life and death matters of the heart and soul, those situations come up sooner rather than later for seeing what can go extraordinarily well when families are prepared, and what can be hurtful and devastating when family arguments happen in hospital hallways.

Those family conversations bring out the tough questions and even more potent realizations. There will come a time when my parents are no longer living. There's a good chance that I will get a phone call or be by a hospital bed and bear witness to the grief of losing the people who gave me my start in life. And religion is meant to help us deal with those painful situations. Sometimes religion deals with it poorly by telling us that if we have trust in God, those bad things won't happen to us. But real religion, honest religion reminds us that none of us gets to experience life grief-free, but God will be with us in our sadness, and God encourages us to be there for each other especially in those moments when life deals us a crushing blow.

*Love is strong as death. Passion fierce as the grave.*

If I were to ever have to hang my theology on one singular verse of scripture, that one would be it. It is the reminder, pure and simple that even death, that final nemesis of us all, does not get the final word – thanks be to God. God gets the last word, and the last word is always – LOVE. *Love wins.* That's the "Rob Bell," "cooler than cool theologian," "I'm friends with Oprah" way of saying it. It's not bad, but I like the biblical love poetry even better. Love is strong as death. Its flashes are flashes of fire – a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love; neither can floods drown it. There is no monetary amount that can buy it – and even if you tried – it would be rejected completely.

It's so true. Love is all those things and then some. And in the Bible, those two precious verses are tucked into a poetic drama of young lovers in the Song of Solomon. It's the kind of poetry that could make you blush if you had to read it out loud in church, and there it is – tucked in near the prayers of the Psalms and the advice of Proverbs. It precedes, in our Biblical order, the prophets who speak of God's steadfast love in times of great turmoil and human rebellion. It foreshadows the sacrifice made by Jesus who laid down his life for his friends – all in service to demonstrating how vast and deep God's love is for humankind. The scandal of the cross is that love comes back, and it keeps coming back even when the powers that be would have it utterly destroyed. You can't kill the love of God – not by a cross, not by a gas chamber, not by war, or greed, or lust for power. But imagine this, you can talk about the love of God in the midst of the poetry of lovers who call to each other to come away and experience all the beauty the world has to offer. God is the inspiration behind all kinds of love – young romantic love, familial love, the love of friends, the love of nature, the love of one's place or one's work, and the love of life itself. God is love; and those who know love will know God.

The Bible is a long and enduring love story – punctuated occasionally by sentences that speak in the language of song and verse. At least that's how I like to read it. It helps to shape my view of our sacred book to recognize in it the power of love – and the frustrations of loving others in so very human, so very incomplete, and frustrating ways.

The Bible is also a story of love gone wrong. That's the essence of sin – loving the wrong things, or sometimes loving the right things in the wrong ways. We mess it up. Our messages about love come from imperfect sources – a lot of the time. If you learn about romantic love from the movies – your love life is bound to be filled with disappointment. Our own families send mixed messages about how we love and who we ought to love. It is no joke that the very

first murder in the Bible is brother killing brother. We get the wrong message about God's love too. We imagine that God's love for us is conditional – depending on what we believe, or how good we are, or if worship in all the right ways. And the Bible makes it easy sometimes to fall into those traps of thinking we aren't good enough, or righteous enough, or perfect enough, or talented enough to merit God's love.

But if we begin with the premise that God is love, and that God's love is freely given, not something we have to work hard or be special to get, then I think the Bible makes a whole lot more sense. At least to me it does. I love the fiery intensity of the verses in the Song of Solomon, but it probably helps that it's balanced by the love poetry of 1 Corinthians 13 – that familiar poem about mature love – the love that goes above and beyond infatuation and endures forever. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious, or boastful, or arrogant, or rude.... It's a common wedding text, and with good reason. It explains that love requires a lot of us. My Methodist clergy friend Elaine use to pair the Corinthians text at weddings with the reminder to look at the person you are marrying today and remember that you will be the one wiping applesauce from his or her chin if there comes a time when he or she cannot do it on their own. Love evolves over time. It doesn't stay in that "raging flame" stage or that "perfect child" phase forever.

I'm learning about love... still. And the Bible keeps on teaching. There was a time in my life when I would have avoided the word "love" with a fervor. I found it hard to say. I learned in my younger years that it was something you held on to because the amount of love you had to give was limited, and reserved only for a few. You didn't say it just to anyone or for any reason. That one time my mother caught me whispering into the phone to my high school boyfriend that I loved him, she had a fit. That word should be withheld for the ONE, not given away to high

school sweethearts. Indeed, it was true that it was hard for her to say herself. So she, with the worried expression of a mother whose daughter was in a teenage relationship, gave me a lecture about it. Now I get it. Between the difficulty of young heartbreak and the anxiety over young relationships pushed too far too fast, that word has the power to be dangerous. It's fire. It's unquenchable. It's valuable. But what I have learned since then is that love grows by giving it away. It doesn't become lesser than. It isn't something that has to be hoarded or stored under a rock. Now, given my upbringing, I'm still a bit baffled by my one friend who "loves everybody darling," but I'm not afraid to use the word "love" anymore – mostly.

Besides getting over my anxiety about the word itself, I'm learning to be more loving in spite of my fear that love makes me vulnerable. In that 4-hour drive to my parents' house this weekend, I set my mind to loving them, to treating them with tenderness and kindness, to showing patience and honoring them by allowing God's presence to guide me in our conversations. I knew we would have deep things to talk about and yet it wasn't my job to force a particular subject or control any outcomes. My job was to listen, to be patient and kind, and hopefully bring a little bit of joy and love to an otherwise tough kind of visit. That becomes poetry, or at least amplifies the love poetry of scripture when we allow life to show us how to love.

I share with you my story – in part because it's on my mind – but also as an example of what we all have in common as human beings who want to love and want to be loved. God knows our needs before we ask. God knows the desires of our hearts. The willingness for God to risk love at all costs reminds us that our risks for love are important too. It's important to tell and to show those people who are dear to us that we love them. My mother and I still don't always make grand pronouncements of our familial love for each other. That would be out of character.

But this weekend she trusted me to listen, and I slowed down enough to pay attention and be present. Sometimes that bit of effort is all that it takes to let love grow. So with your family, or friends, or whoever is on your mind or heart to care for in the coming week, let yourself love them, and allow yourself to be loved in return. I dare say I think that's the plan God has had for us all along. Amen.