

Song of Solomon 8:6-7

⁶Set 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.

⁷Many 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.

John 15:5-17 (The Message) – DEPARTURE NARRATIVE

⁵⁻⁸“I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples.

⁹⁻¹⁰“I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love.

¹¹⁻¹⁵“I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father.

¹⁶“You didn't choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won't spoil. As fruit bearers, whatever you ask the Father in relation to me, he gives you.

¹⁷“But remember the root command: Love one another.

May 28, 2017
Song of Solomon 8:6-7; John 15:5-17
“Love One Another, And My Joy Will Be Your Joy”
Kerra Becker English

Why is it that THE message of the gospel is such a tough one to preach? It’s easy enough to find preaching material in the stories of the gospel. You tell the story; then re-tell why the story matters now. The parables of Jesus are already mini-sermons, so you plumb the metaphors of Jesus to translate them into today’s idiom. And then, if you have a preacher who roams outside of the gospel for preaching – it’s easy to get all preachy and weigh in on multiple issues of right and wrong from the prophets, or from Paul’s letters. But to preach, fully and completely, the love of the gospel, the main message, the point to leave all other points in the dust, is tough.

It’s tough because authenticity in love is a rare gem in actual life, and putting it in words only makes it seem less real. Hallmark has a multi-million dollar industry based on putting our expressions of love into words, but I think what they really do is alleviate our own anxiety about what to say by charging us \$4 for a greeting card. We pay it too. Self-help books exploit the very same market. “The Five Love Languages” book is not just a best-seller based on a preference test, it has its own trademark. If you scroll down the Google listing for five love languages, on the very first page, an article pops up called, “How the Five Love Languages Can Help You Win at Relationships.”

As silly as it sounds to say that title out loud, we have been encouraged in our culture to make love into a game that we can somehow “win.” We want to know love and experience love. We want to be loving people. But I think we also want to buy into this idea that it’s easy, that it’s like the romance novels, or the snapshots of parenting that make it look like so much fun. We may have long lists of friends from a Facebook page or Christmas Card list standpoint, but do we take the time to show those friends face-to-face friendship? The case can be made for the deterioration of

relationships in this highly individualized and increasingly virtual reality we now live in, but the truth has always been that any relationship, any friendship requires something of us for it to thrive.

Jesus knew this. His concept of love is nothing like the rhyming couplets of a Hallmark card, and it makes the love languages look more like a guidebook for manipulating your significant other to get more of what you want. So what does Jesus say he wants of us right now? What is so important that it becomes the main point of his very last lecture to his disciples? “This is my command,” he says, “love one another as I have loved you.” In our first week of exploring this lecture, Jesus tells us to do as he does. Next, he tells us to keep his commandments, to listen to what he has said. But this time, Jesus commands us to love just like he loves. And he tells us this, not only because he CAN tell us what to do, he’s telling us how to live a joy-filled life.

Is this what you would expect a spiritual leader to give for a last lecture? He’s not trying to cram us full of knowledge or tell us in great detail how to fix the world. He tells us to love each other, to be filled with the kind of love God has for us, the kind of love he spent his life offering. The best way to love, according to Jesus, is through friendship, the kind of sacrificial friendship that puts giving first, and receiving as a bonus. He doesn’t want these men to be his servants or even his students anymore. He counts them as friends. And it turns out that they aren’t always the best or most trustworthy friends, but he loves them anyway.

These are Jesus’ last words to his closest friends before being arrested, tried, and convicted for trumped up charges against both church and state. He’s going to be executed by a humiliating punishment designed to terrify others who would attempt to further his message. Nevertheless, his primary goal, just as he calls it out in this lecture, is love. He even loves the people who have come to hate him for proclaiming God’s love. That kind of love beyond the “eye for an eye” logic of the world’s thinking became a scandal to religion. When we’re being honest, it still is. That’s also what

makes it difficult to preach. Love, this kind of love, is dangerous. The disciples knew it, and when he was going through his worst – they scattered.

In this passage, Jesus does something no Hallmark card would ever do, he talks about love and death in the same breath – which always reminds me of those two verses we read today from the Song of Solomon. Love holds power over death. Love is to be valued more importantly than even life. Now this is NOT a Romeo and Juliet tragedy about love that romanticizes death nor is it a justification for allowing abuse to happen “out of love.” To the contrary, we must scrub that notion out of our brains. What he means is that love will go to any length to make itself known, and when it does, it can be dangerous.

Jesus loved dangerously and recklessly. He calls us to do the same. Of course he is talking about himself when he says that the most loving thing one can do is lay down your life for your friends. That’s the NRSV translation, and he’s about to do just that. But I think he is laying that same charge at our feet. That charge though, requires a bit of unpacking. He’s talking to people who are his equals, his closest friends. He’s not talking someone into tolerating abuse, or becoming a doormat to others. He’s talking about taking the full strength of humanity, infused with divine power, and letting love be the guiding principle for absolutely everything he touches, something he knows will lead to raging anger and paralyzing fear from the powers-that-be in our world.

I dare say that this is where we choose to look at Jesus with the kind of awe that makes us think we just can’t love like that. Jesus was perfect. We are messed up. And mostly we get messed up by that feeling that we just aren’t loved the way that we were meant to be loved. We’ve been hurt by love, and we don’t want to experience the basic pains of human love if we can choose to experience only the good parts. So we get hurt by someone we love, and we cut them off. Or we feel remorse at having hurt someone that we love, and that guilt keeps us from loving even more deeply. We get

stuck. It gets too hard. We settle for lesser things than the joy generated by this kind of love that dares to keep on loving.

Allow me to recap for just a moment. This is Jesus' last lecture. He is speaking directly to his closest friends, knowing both their gifts and their limitations. He knows his situation is terminal, and the diagnosis he has been given is that he has disturbed too many people in power with the way he has loved others and he must cease to exist. By extension, as we listen to this lecture, he is telling you to go and do likewise. Go and love so hard that it turns people inside out with venomous hatred. That's where he's going to go next. So do you believe him when he tells you that if you love, like this, you will know joy beyond joy? Incomparable, inconceivable joy. You will know mature joy that will be complete in all things.

Like I said at the beginning, this call to love as Jesus loved is tough to preach for many reasons. Perhaps GK Chesterton's most famous quote says it best. He said, "It's not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting, it's that Christianity has been found difficult and not tried." Going to that length to love may not be what you thought you were signing on for. And yet, to be a follower of Jesus is to walk down a similar path, to make love your life-long mission, however your particular gifts and limitations allow or encourage you to do so.

We may prefer an easier path, one that, if not completely in the way of the world, at least doesn't ruffle as many feathers as Jesus did. I understand. My diligence in loving gets worn out. There are too many options, too great a need. And yet, the times when I have felt specifically called, appointed perhaps to love deeply as Jesus loved, I do recall those moments as moments of great joy. So maybe today I've at least scratched the surface when it comes to describing how Jesus calls us to love as deeply as he loved. Maybe I've hinted at his same secret that in doing so, joy will flood your life. But I also think that sometimes the poets, and artists, and singers, and dancers can nudge us to an even deeper understanding than the constraints of a sermon format, or lecture as Jesus gave. My

last words then, on this particular subject will be to share the song lyrics of “Much to Teach (Joy)” by Kyle Matthews who is a Baptist preacher in Greenville, South Carolina and a musician who always seems to take my breath away. This song makes “Joy” the character, the personification of this wise teacher, who gives us glimpses of God’s love. Listen, and if you like the words, the download of this song is available for 99 cents on his website.

Kyle Matthews
Much to Teach (Joy)

No silly school girl, though young she seems
She’s lived through nightmares I’ve only dreamed
I’m her apprentice
And Joy has much to teach
Life gives her reasons to just give up
To stop believing that God is love
But Joy’s relentless because God loves so much
When we look back to when we thought all hope was gone
She shows us God was right here with us all along
She knows that heaven is on our side
God is not silent; he does not hide
Joy counts my blessings and opens up my eyes
When we look back to when we thought all hope was gone
She shows us God was right here with us all along
She’ll take me dancing if I give in
She’ll keep me singing ‘til I’m convinced
‘Til I’m convinced
More wise and graceful than sweet success
And far more faithful than happiness
Joy is the promise that puts my heart to rest
Joy is the promise, She is the promise