**Enter the Romance**

I will start by reading an interesting text message conversation that Kathy and I had this week. Now, as background information, we have a teaching schedule for me, Matthew, and Jason, but it occasionally gets switched around who is teaching when, so Kathy sends me this text. Do you preach this Sunday?

Lance: Yes. Sex. (not ? but .)

Kathy: Yes I saw it

Lance: I should be more correct and say romance, but you know that is my issue.

Kathy: It should be interesting

And I share that because sex and romance is an area that most couples struggle with at some point in your relationship and that Kathy and I are no different. Now some of you may be in marriages that are terrific and others in marriages that are difficult. And as we talk about this relationship between a man and his wife, it may be helpful for you to remember when your heart was most tender towards your spouse. It may be when you first met and fell in love and you felt those emotions and feelings that we are going to read about. For those of you who are single and marriage may be on the horizon; something you long to experience. You can ask God, “What do you want to teach me about the kind of marriage that you intended mankind to have?”

Now, when I started reading the text for today, my first thought was actually back to the Retreat and if you remember I said that one strong argument for the truthfulness of the Bible is that there are 66 books written by around 40 authors over a period of 1600 years and there is this common theme of God’s love for mankind and His salvation through them and we have seen that in our study of the Old Testament. And then I turned to the first verses of the Song of Solomon. **<ENTER>**

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—*

 *for your love is more delightful than wine.*

Now if there is any book of the Bible that doesn’t really fit in; perhaps, it would be this one. I mean, if I polled 100 people by reading this passage and asking them where it came from, I doubt that anyone would mention the Bible. I think most people would say a Romance Novel. And if you continue to read this book of the Bible, you realize that these verses are actually quite tame as opposed to some of the other imagery that is used in describing the joy of sex.

Now, if you struggle to see how this book belongs in the Bible, you wouldn’t be the first one. Jewish scholars questioned whether this book should be included or not in the Old Testament canon of scriptures, but eventually they agreed that this book was Holy and consistent with the rest of the Old Testament scriptures and especially with what we read in Genesis. So, this book has passed the test of time and it remains today as part of our God inspired words to us. So, we have to ask ourselves why did God give it to us? What does God want me to learn from this book?

So, to set the stage for this little drama, **<ENTER>**you have to meet the three main characters in the Song of Songs.

**<ENTER>**First, there is the woman: She is often called the ‘beloved.’ This woman is deeply in love and longs for her lover. She is quite outspoken in her love for her man and praises him and his character.

**<ENTER>**Next, there is the man: He is called ‘the lover’. Most scholars attribute this text to Solomon and that he is the lover. He is bold in declaring his love for his bride. He also celebrates her beauty and enjoys her love.

**<ENTER>**Lastly, there are the friends of the woman: they speak as one voice and they are sort of a cheering squad for this couple and they encourage them to enjoy their love for one another.

As you read your bible, you will find captions that tell us who is speaking. They do this because it is a poetic book and it makes it much easier to follow the drama which sort of has the feeling of a play with three primary movements. **<ENTER>**

The first movement is the Anticipation. When you read this section, you see a couple who is madly in love. They can’t wait to be together. They long to be with each other, but they are not married, so they dream and wait for the big day.

**<ENTER>**The second movement is the wedding and the honeymoon. This section is very poetic description of the wedding scene and a beautiful exchange between the new husband and wife before they consummate their wedding.

**<ENTER>**The third movement is their relationship after the wedding. It celebrates love, romance, and the joy of sexual intimacy. It is a great reminder that true romantic fulfillment begins on the wedding day, but doesn’t end there.

**<ENTER>** Let’s start back in verse 2-3. What else do you see in verse 2? Who is talking here, the man or the woman? Right, the woman. Now, she is being pretty bold here asking for his kisses. And we tend to think that women in the ancient middle east who wore veils and long robes; that they were probably quite modest about sexual matters. But it begins here and as we walk through this song, it becomes very clear that this woman has a level of desire and passion every bit as powerful as the man.

Then she says ‘your name is like perfume’. She is captivated by this name. And people are still fascinated with names. This happens with deep attraction. OK, confession time. How many women here ever like a guy so much that you tried writing your first name with his last name? Show of hands here.

And we are sort of fascinated by the names of those we love, but there is more happening here than just a name. And typically, the bible associates a name to someone’s character or identity. So, when she speaks about his name, she is speaking of who he is as a person. She is deeply drawn to the character of this man. He is a man of integrity, honesty, and loyalty.

And if you are single, be careful who you give your heart to. Be sure to examine their character thoroughly. Does their name have a fragrance like perfume or more like a litter box? Some of the saddest stories you hear are of people who have developed a passionate attachment to someone with an untrustworthy character.

And I taught about this during our study of Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth. I mentioned this book in that sermon, it is called *Hooked* and it was written by two medical doctors, Gynocologists, who have taken some of the latest advances in the study of the brain, and have come to some astounding conclusions:

* Sexual activity releases chemicals in the brain, creating emotional bonds between partners.
* Breaking these bonds can cause depression and make it harder to bond with someone else in the future.
* Chemicals released in the brain during sex can become addictive. It’s one of the reasons why pornography is so damaging and so difficult to break that addiction.

And their strong recommendation to young people based on science is that humans are designed to emotionally bond to 1 person and sex is one of the key ways that that bond is made, so don’t have sex with someone until you know that this is the person that you want to spend the rest of your life with.

Modern science. Sounds an awful lot like the exact same advice this book has been giving for the last 3,000 years concerning sexual activity before marriage. And we have to realize that this message sounds silly today. People just don’t want to believe it.

**<ENTER>** I read this article in the local online newspaper a few weeks ago. It says Sexting is the new normal for teenagers. Sexting is sending sexually explicit pictures via mobile phones to others and this was a research study done in the USA that followed 1000 young people over a period of a few years. They found that sexting was a common starting point for young people to become sexually active, but as this is seen as OK, they told parents not to worry. It’s the new normal, accept it. Forget the other science that says any sexual activity can be damaging. And actually, the Song of Songs sends a warning to young people about this. **<ENTER>**

*Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.*

Three times in this short book, this message in repeated. Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires. Love and sexual intimacy are so strong; you don’t want to wake it up because it is so difficult to control. And that is shown in this study where kids who participate in sexting are about 1.5 times more likely to become sexually active than kids who don’t. And we live in a society that is trying to awaken love all the time and with younger and younger kids.

Parents, you have to be aware and actively try to protect your children. No one else is going to do it for you. And you have to take the fight because your teenager is going to say, ‘no one else is saying this to me. What’s the problem?’ And I want you to know that our Youth Leader is giving this same message to our youth. So, you are not alone.

**<ENTER>**Now, getting back to ‘your name is like perfume’, if you are married to someone with a good name, tell them how grateful you are. Let them know how important their character and integrity mean to you. And if you are given the opportunity, share it with others when the time is appropriate. Sincere compliments will leave a lasting impact with your spouse.

And we see a little bit of that in the text here in chapter 1 and it continues in chapter 2. The Lover and the Beloved are speaking to each other and there is a playful type of banter that is going on as they exchange compliments and try to build each other up. And you can see that their words are pouring out of a generous heart towards one another. Take a look at chapter 2 verse 1-2. **<ENTER>**

Beloved

 1 I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.

Lover

 2 Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens.

Now, this sounds a little boastful at first. She says I a rose of Sharon, I’m beautiful. But Old Testament scholars say that a rose in ancient times was not like what we think of in our day. It was not something that you would get in a florist shop. It was not a valuable flower, but was rather common. And that was also true for a lily of the valley, it was a common variety flower. What she is really saying is, “I’m not so attractive. I’m just kind of average.”

Now she is giving him an opportunity to say that he sees her totally differently. Now, when this is overdone, it can be manipulative, like someone is fishing for compliments. But when it’s honest, it can be an open door for an expression of love and affirmation. And how does he respond? Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens – because every other woman in the world is a thorn compared to you, it causes pain even to look at them compared to you my darling.

And we see him using that phrase ‘my darling’ nine times in the book. And the woman has pet names for the man as well. And we do the same thing today. And usually those names come from one of three categories: food, animals, or body parts. Some examples are sugar, honey, teddy bear, and those sorts of things. And if we’re real creative, we may combine them and come up with things like sugar lips, honey bear, or whatever. What gets me worried is that one of those names was the name of our first dog? But she was named after a campground, so I think I’m safe. Actually, Kathy wanted to name our first dog, Baby, but I told her I am NOT going to yell, ‘Hey Baby come here!’ when I call my dog.

Anyway, there is this tender love language that couples in love speak to one another. And they create this ‘culture of two’ as one psychologist has put it. Where they have their own love language, there own little secrets, those special times with only the two of them.

And here’s the challenge for you if you’re married: Do you relate to your spouse with a generous heart or a stingy one? Do you give your spouse sincere praise? Do you build rituals into your lives only for the two of you? Do you go on dates with each other and create lasting memories? Do you guard your culture of two? It’s something for every married couple to reflect about. **<ENTER>**

One last thing in this first movement, here in chapter 2:16 is the first time we see this phrase, “*My lover is mine and I am his*”. And it is repeated 2 more times in chapter 6 & 7. And to this day, it is often used by Jewish brides at weddings. It’s a statement of possession: she is saying, ‘we belong to each other’. It’s not an unhealthy, jealous type of belonging, but rather it is a sense of the deep commitment they have to one another.

Now, we have learned in our study of the Old Testament that God is very concerned about covenants. God’s covenant is, “*I will be your God and you will be my people*.” In a similar way, the marital contract is, “*My lover is mine and I am his*.” And when two people make a marriage covenant, they are saying to each other, ‘you know, there’s not much you can count on in this world. Your may lose your health, you may lose your wealth, you may not ever get that great job, you may lose your good looks, but you can count on one thing: As long as my heart is beating, it’s all yours. I will not give my heart or body to anybody else in the way that I give it to you.”

The next movement is the wedding scene and the honeymoon. Turn to chapter 4:1-5. Here, the husband, the lover, is telling his bride how beautiful she is. **<ENTER>**

 *1 How beautiful you are, my darling!*

 *Oh, how beautiful!*

 *Your eyes behind your veil are doves.*

 *Your hair is like a flock of goats*

 *descending from Mount Gilead.*

 *2 Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,*

 *coming up from the washing.*

 *Each has its twin;*

 *not one of them is alone.*

Now, this is the kind of imagery that gets people bogged down when they read through the Song of Songs. Here’s a few insights to help you get through this. Firstly, ‘*Your eyes are doves*.” Doves in that culture were prized for their color, which was kind of a translucent grey. So, he’s saying here that her eyes are beautiful. And that he’s looked deep into them. And they say the eyes are the gateway to your soul. So, it’s an intimate expression of love.

“*Your hair is a flock of goats*.” Now, this would not be a good compliment in our day, but it made sense to them. In those days, when a large herd of goats would descend from a mountain, they would wind down the hillside in a way that was striking. He’s saying here that he likes her full and curly hair. I love your hair. What women doesn’t like that compliment.

“*Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing. Each has its twin; not one of them is alone.”*  Let’s be honest, this one sounds strange. But in those days it made sense. Remember, there weren’t any dentists or orthodontists in those days. It was a bad time for teeth, everyone had missing teeth. But his beloved has beautiful teeth. They are white, just like sheep that have been shorn and washed. And she’s not missing any teeth either, *each has a twin, not one is alone*. I think a woman with all her teeth is attractive, don’t you. This is a nice compliment in those days.

And he goes on in even more intimate ways to tell her how beautiful she is to him. He even describes her as a garden with the most wonderful fruits and spices. Everything pleasing to the senses. And this movement ends with some intimate words as they consummate the marriage starting in verse 16. **<ENTER>**

(Beloved)

 *Awake, north wind, and come, south wind!*

 *Blow on my garden,*

 *that its fragrance may spread abroad.*

 *Let my lover come into his garden*

 *and taste its choice fruits.*

(Lover)

 *I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;*

 *I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.*

 *I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;*

 *I have drunk my wine and my milk.*

(Friends)

 *Eat, O friends, and drink; drink your fill, O lovers*

We see the use of word pictures to communicate what is going on here. It’s not too hard to decipher what these images mean. This is their wedding night. They are meant to enjoy the fullness and wonder of sexual expression within a marriage relationship. They are rejoicing in the intimacy that God has given them. Both the man, the woman, and the Friends all see this as something to be celebrated. And that fact that it was recorded here in scripture tells us that God rejoices in this also.

**<ENTER>** The last movement tells about how the story goes on after the wedding night. And even in the most passionate love stories, there are always hard times. But the couple renews their love for each other and declares that no matter what, they will not let their love die. **<ENTER>**

*Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned*

Here is a closing declaration that their love will be unquenchable. But I want to emphasize that relationship take work and in our world today of throw away everything, we need to remember the promises we made to our spouses and to God and we declare, “No matter how hard things get, divorce is never an option.” Kathy and I had to say this several times in our marriage when it was difficult and God honors that kind of commitment. He can heal your relationship and sometimes we need help from others. Kathy and I can testify that sometimes you need a counselor to help you work things out and to listen to each other in a constructive way. There is no shame in getting help to heal your relationship and we can point you to some resources if you ask us.

Now, there are some who treat this book as a pure allegory about God’s love for the church, but as you’ve seen, you just don’t come away with that picture. There are passages in the New Testament that do speak of God’s love for the church in terms of a husband’s love for his bride. But this romantic poem was written a thousand years before those New Testament letters and it confirms the view about romantic love that we see in Genesis when God created man and woman and instituted marriage.

**<ENTER>** Genesis 2:24-25 says,

*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*

You see marriage wasn’t some cultural practice that evolved; God himself started it as a part of his plan for men and women. And we see God’s intent here was for one man and one woman to leave their families and in a public way make a commitment to one another, to be united, and, only then can they become one flesh in a sexual union.

You know, living here in Sweden, there are a lot of couples who live ‘sambo’. And if you’re a Christian in this situation, my question to you is this: it’s obvious you’ve made a commitment already, why not formalize it publicly in front of your friends and family and in front of God? It will only get better when you both know that the level of commitment between you is rock solid and for life. And if you’re not willing to do that, then there really isn’t a commitment at all and God says that’s not my plan for you. I only intend for you to experience that level of intimacy with one person in your life and if you do that with anyone else, it just spoils the goodness I intended for you.

As that’s true for most sin, it is just spoiled goodness. You see, the devil takes the good things from God and he spoils them. And we see that in Genesis after the Fall of mankind, sexual sins begin to take hold and they continue to grow to the point where cultic prostitution becomes how man tries to worship God. How messed up is that? And that was one of the reasons, God told the Israelites to totally wipe out the nations living in the promised land because He knew that it would eventually lead them down the wrong path away from Him. He knew people would be drawn to worship sex as their god instead of Him. And as we have seen, that is exactly what happened.

And to be honest, isn’t that pretty much true today in our society. Who do you think gets more worship from people: Sex or God? What do people put more money, time, and effort into? Sex or God? The answer is easy to see. God is the big loser. And the real irony is that if people would only put all that effort and love into their relationship with God, then they’d get all the rest. God has a great plan for you. He loves you and He only wants the best for you and He knows the path to take, He created you. We just need to decide to follow Him.

PRAYER: Thank God for the good gift of sex.

Thank God that he loves us the church like a husband loves his bride.

Pray blessing over the marriages. Pray for new beginnings and healing.

Pray for rekindling the spark for romance in our marriages.

Pray for wisdom and decisions for sexual purity from our youth