



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THAT OTHER LOVE”

Scripture Lessons: Selections from the Song of Solomon

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, February 15, 2009.

Many, many times you have heard me preach on the subject of love. In fact, I have probably preached on love more often than any other topic. If you were to peruse the file of index cards that I keep on my sermons, you would soon discover that the cards labeled love: God’s love for us; Our love for God; Our love for others contain numerous entries. As you might expect, most of these messages have concerned *Agape* love, which is really a God-like love and it is the way that we have been loved in Jesus Christ. *Agape* love is personal, sacrificial, and permanent. It is subject to the will and that one can make a conscious decision to love in this manner and therefore it is not dependent upon ones feelings or emotions. Quite often you have heard me say that Christian love, *Agape* love, is far different from love as it is commonly understood in our culture. That is to say, it is not some intense romantic, sentimental, sexual kind of feeling. However, I have said that so often that you could well conclude that this is a kind of disavowal of romance, even a denial of the sexual side of human nature and a negation of eroticism. And so this morning, with Valentine’s Day now behind us, I would like to discuss with you that other love, love of a romantic nature and share with you some things I have learned from my personal experience and thirty-six years of pastoral ministry, much of which has been spent in talking with couples about to be married or struggling to stay married. There are many misconceptions and myths with respect to romantic love and I would simply like to discuss them with you.

Love has come to mean everything or nothing in the English speaking world but the Greeks had four specific words to talk about the primary kinds of love. First their was *Agape*, the God-like love that sacrifices for the welfare of the other; *Philia* which is brotherly love, the love among friends and companions; *Storge*, which is love among family members; and lastly *Eros* which is this sexual or romantic love.

Let me go ahead and confess that this is a topical rather than a textual sermon. Most of my sermons begin with a text and try to examine and expose it for our day. But this time I began with a topic and went looking for the text. And you should know that the Bible does not have much to say about this romantic, erotic and sexual love. The Bible actually has more to say about when sexual love is wrong than it does about when sexual love is right. Now there is one glaring exception to the Bible’s treatment of romantic love and that is this remarkable book in the Old Testament that is often called the Song of Solomon but is better called the Song of Songs. Song of Songs is actually a Hebrew idiom meaning the best of all songs. Much like the King of Kings is the best of all kings, the Song of Songs is the best of songs and this is clearly the song of love.

Let me read you now some excerpts from this remarkable book. Actually I will be reading some of the less sexually explicit portions of the Song of Songs which in an exquisite way affirm the beauty and the propriety of sexual feelings, of love and romance. But some sections of this book I

could hardly read from the pulpit because the images are quite graphic and leave little to the imagination. (Read selections for Song of Songs)

Bible scholars through out the ages have had a difficult time in knowing what to make of this passionate little love poem hidden between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah. Certainly it is an atypical Bible book. I do not recall ever having heard a sermon from the Song of Solomon. Occasionally their maybe readings at a wedding service but otherwise it is seldom read from the pulpit. Here is a book that is full of sensuous symbols and erotic images. It is the only book in the Bible to have all of its content put into the mouth of speakers who are never identified and whose speeches have no introduction. The book lacks any structure or movement and leads to no conclusion. And perhaps most interesting of all is the fact that it is purely secular in character, with no apparent theological or moral overtones. Not only does God never make an appearance, but the name of God is never mentioned throughout the book. There have been wild attempts to interpret this song allegorically and to make it say thing that may never have been intended. However, its inclusion in the Canon of scripture primarily indicates to me that a man and women can glorify God completely while delighting in simple, sensuous, and passionate love for each other. And I hope that today's message applies to both young and old, male and female regardless of age or gender romantic love can be one of God's greatest blessings in life.

As a disclaimer let me quickly say that this message was written with no particular person or couple in mind. Since I have counseled with many of you before and after marriage, I wouldn't want you to think that your particular situation prompted any of the points I will endeavor to make.

The truth of the matter is that we can be very confused about romantic love. We tend to be overly sentimental and simplistic. We say such things as "love is blind" or "love cures all" and gloss over the sometimes unpleasant realities about romantic attraction. Our culture encourages us to romanticize all of our love relationships and even to romanticize marriage. But this can last for only so long and it often pays a poor dividend. So I want us to be candid and honest.

Long before I ever moved to South Carolina I saved a newspaper account of a candid wedding announcement that appeared in a small South Carolina newspaper, "The Morton County Farmer".

"Mr. Jim Galeway and Miss Georgianne Bentlow were married Monday at the home of the Bride's parents, Mr. & Mrs. Alex Bentlow, the Rev. A.A. Deckett officiating.

The groom is a popular young bum who hasn't done a lick of work since he got expelled in his Junior year of college. He manages to dress well and keep a supply of spending money because his dad is a soft-hearted old fool who takes up his bad checks instead of letting him go to jail where he belongs.

The bride is a skinny, fast, little idiot who has been kidded by every boy in town since she was 12 years old. She paints like a Sioux Indian, sucks cigarettes and drinks mean corn liquor when she is out joy-riding in her dad's car at night. She doesn't know how to cook, sew or keep house. The house was newly plastered for the wedding and the exterior newly painted, thus appropriately carrying out the decorative theme, for the groom was newly plastered and the bride freshly painted. The groom wore a rented dinner suit over athletic underwear of imitation silk, and

his pants were held up by pale green suspenders. His number 9 patent leather shoes matched his state in tightness and harmonized nicely with the axle grease polish of his hair.

P. S. This is probably the last issue of this paper but my life ambition has been to write up one wedding and tell the truth. Now that it's done, death can have no sting." (Morton County Farmer)

Well, we can't be quite that realistic about love and marriage but a little honesty and candor certainly would not hurt matters, so let me give you a little quiz today. This is a true/false test but I only want you to answer in your mind.

1. True or False: When it comes to love, opposites attract.

In answering this for myself I would say that while in general it is true that opposites do often attract, it is also true that this can make for an unhappy and unstable relationship and a poor marriage in the long run. Yale psychologist Theodore Reik once wrote that in love we often project our ideal image of our self on to another person. Therefore a shy girl finds an assertive boy attractive and loves him for his outgoing nature. A callous man might easily become infatuated by a sensitive and vulnerable woman. So it is easy to become completely enchanted and infatuated by a person quite different from ourselves, but if it is marriage that we have in mind, and if we desire harmony and happiness in a long term relationship, we would be wise to find a person who shares our interests, our values, and even perhaps some of our personality traits. Love can take root in a hostile or strange environment, but it is very difficult for it to thrive and grow there.

2. True or False: When you are truly in love with another person you will have a strong physical desire for him or her.

Generally speaking I would say that this is true and that these feelings are a good thing, even a God thing, and need to be recognized, appreciated and controlled. So powerful are these feelings that God restricts them to certain boundaries and commitments. In the Song of Songs when the woman speaks to her sisters in Jerusalem she says on several occasions, "Don't excite love, don't stir it up, until the time is right --- and you are ready." But if you are ready and the time is right and you are mature enough and responsible enough to live in a committed and supportive relationship then your strong physical and sexual desires can be rightly fulfilled. Young people throughout the ages in all cultures have struggled to contain their strong physical urges and attraction for another person. To be sure this can be problematic in any young relationship but it may even be more problematic if you do not know this struggle. Because to be in a romantic and passionate relationship brings with it strong sexual desires.

However, listen carefully as I add two critically important footnotes here. One is that this physical side of love is very fragile, temperamental and vacillating. Depending upon outward circumstances, inner moods and attitudes, and one's general physical and mental health --- these physical desires can in one moment be so intense that they almost uncontrollable and then seemingly nonexistent a short time later. Therefore it is not necessarily true that if the physical desire is gone, so to is love. I have known many married couples who have gone through long periods of time, even years thinking the coals of romance were dead or dying embers, only to discover that some change in themselves or in their circumstances mysteriously and wonderfully fanned those dying embers into blazing flames once again.

The second footnote with regard to this matter of love and physical desire is this: our culture had duped many of us into believing that what really makes for happiness in a romantic relationship or in marriage is mutual physical attraction and sexual compatibility. The physical is an important part but certainly not the only part of love. There are people with whom you might share a strong physical attraction but with whom you would be completely miserable if you had to live with them. You might have totally different goals, values, interests and taste, despite the fact that in a physical sense there may be a real chemistry between the two of you. (By the way, yesterday's Post and Courier had an interesting article on the real "Chemistry of Love". There's more to that than we might suppose.) On the other hand there are couples who are completely happy and quite fulfilled living together for whom the physical side of their relationship is a relatively minor if not unimportant aspect of their love for each other.

3. True or False: Many people fall in love at first sight.

My answer to that would be false. One can fall into many things --- a ditch, a lake, bankruptcy, one can even fall into infatuation or enchantment. But true love is not fallen into so much as it is grown into. Many of you would tell me, but we fell in love at first sight. Are you saying that our love was not real? No, what I am saying is that if it was at first sight, you may have fallen in love with the person's beauty, his manners, her intelligence, her talents, her charms but it really wasn't the whole person you fell in love with because you could not have been exposed to the whole person in one brief encounter. Your love may have begun at that point but love is grown into and not fallen into.

After our first date when my wife was 15 and I was 18 she came home and told her mother that she and I were going to marry. I assure you this had never been discussed and I don't know how she knew that. Both of us were terribly infatuated and both of us may have been in love with the person we imagined the other to be. But at that point in our relationship, she did not know that I boarded on being a workaholic nor that I scrunched towel instead of folding them. Nor could I have imagined at that point that this sweet little girl was so wired as to believe that no husband should be seated on the couch watching the news while his wife was cleaning up after dinner. You see she had strange notions that didn't come to light till many years later.

4. True or False: You can only be in love with one person at a time.

I think I have changed on this over the years and I have come to agree with Dr. Russell Dicks, a prominent pastoral counselor, who argued that the belief that you could only truly love one person at a time is one of the most widely held myths in our culture and also one of the most threatening to many people. Add to that the fact that on many occasions as a counselor I have heard people express guilt and confusion because they suddenly find themselves in love with someone in addition to the person to whom they are married. How could this have happened, they wonder, if they are truly in love to begin with?

However, I think it is incredibly easy for this to happen. There are probably half a dozen people right now in this congregation with whom any of you could be in love if only you knew them better or had the opportunity to share with them who you are, how you think, what you treasure, what excites you and frightens you. If you were to discover a real mutuality and compatibility then it is understandable that you might begin to share feelings of affection, concern and mutual attraction. Indeed this experience becomes more and more common as the barriers between the sexes are removed. No longer do men live in one world and women in another. They work side by side. They participate together in sporting activities, in civic activities, in church and community projects. There

is more opportunity today for men and women to talk, to become acquainted, to strike up friendships and to discover perhaps even the budding of a love relationship.

What then are people to do when these feelings and attractions are felt? It will do no good to deny or ignore them or to pretend that they are not there. You can not command yourself not to have these feelings because our emotions are not always subject to our will power. You can no more will yourself not to be in love than you can will yourself to be in love. You feel what you feel and sometimes for no apparent reason. So the first thing a person should do is simply acknowledge what is going on within them. They need to acknowledge it first to themselves and then to someone else, perhaps even to their husband or wife if their relationship is secure enough to handle it. If not, then perhaps this should be shared with a counselor or confidant. Sometimes merely the frank sharing of these feelings will be sufficient to defuse them or to keep them in perspective and thirdly, remember that while you can not control what you feel, you can control what you do and say. There are some things in life that may not be immoral but are certainly inappropriate if you wish to avoid needless misunderstanding and heartache. And there are some relationships that you need to back away from if they threaten the sanctity of your home or if they cause you to compromise what you know God intends for you to be or to do. That is why a persons need to have clear and unmistakable boundaries with respect to what they say or do, especially in the presence of people they find appealing or attractive they can refuse to place themselves in situations where their convictions or commitments may be compromised. Old Martin Luther once said that you can not prevent the bird from flying over your head but you can prevent them from building a nest in you hair.

5. True or False: Jealousy usually varies directly with love. That is, the more you are in love, the greater your tendency to become jealous.

Here is a popular notion that has little if any basis in fact. While it is true that people in love can feel jealously and that one would feel threatened by the loss of anything that is treasured, the fact remains that jealousy is not the product of love. Rather jealousy is the result of insecurity. Jealousy is the product of a threatened loss of love, or status, or esteem. Persons who feel secure in the knowledge that they are loved have few if any thoughts of jealousy. What this means, of course, is that in relationships characterized by extreme jealousy there may be two people with real problems. One may have low self-esteem and feelings of insecurity and the other may have an inability or unwillingness to communicate what they truly feel.

Finally 6. True or False: When you are really in love with another person it will last forever and you can forgive any failing on their part.

I must confess that I was naïve enough to believe that at one point. I used to think that if you truly loved someone that no action on their part could alter your affection. I know today that this is not the case. With *Agape* love, Christian love, this rule may well indeed apply because you can decide to do what is in another person's best interest regardless of how they may have failed you or betrayed you in some way. After all, Christian love can be commanded because it involves the will more than the heart. But romantic love, *Eros* love, is an entirely different matter. If the person with whom you are in love deceives you, rejects you, intimidates you, abuses you, treats you with no respect, you may still choose to do what is in that person's best interest (*Agape*) but your feelings of romantic attraction and intimacy can and may dissipate if not disappear. When persons are able to remain in love even through these adverse circumstances, then they are usually in love with the person as they used to be or with the person that the other is capable of being. Rarely do people love others in a romantic sense regardless of what they say or do.

In bringing this to a close let me say that there are many other ideas concerning romantic love that we could have explored this morning, but I will leave the lovers present among us to discuss these matters between them. However, I am in complete agreement with the writer of the Song of Songs that the love between a man and a woman is a wonderfully thrilling, intense and delightful thing. It is certainly one of the spices God has provided to flavor our days and color our world. Regrettably we will always continue to entertain certain myths and false notions about it. Romance is certainly not the most important thing in life but it would be my wish that each of us could either find that sweetheart or discover in our mate the person whose companionship and character can fill our lives with added dimensions of excitement, joy, pleasure and purpose.

Prayer: Gracious God, bless all of our loves and all of our relationships. Give us the needed patience and perspective to discover that special someone in our lives with whom we can freely and gladly exchange who we are, discovering the joy of loving and being loved. Give us the grace to subordinate everything in our love life and in our relationships to your purposes and plans, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.