

Holy Relations: Love From a Biblical Perspective
Song of Solomon 2:8-14, John 2:1-11, John 15: 9-17
January 14, 2007

As some of you know, I am a topical preacher. This means that I start my sermon preparations from the human condition and work my way back to the Biblical texts for the week. Sometimes I can also align this approach with our weekly Lectionary. Sometimes I can't. This approach requires both longer planning than the lectionary approach and a listening ear to hear the particular human condition of the congregation. As I was putting my sermon plan for 2007 together one of the recurrent questions expressed to me by the people of Bering was: How does the Christian faith inform me in my relationships? How can I be a better partner...a better son or daughter...a better friend? How can I live in a spirit of Christian love in all of my relationships and does the Bible inform me in the area of the love relationship? As we leave the Christmas season and launch toward that next Hallmark Card event known as Valentine's Day I am beginning a new series I entitle, "Holy Relations: Love from a Biblical Perspective." I have also told you that I have been in a period of discernment about my policy of performing weddings here at Bering Memorial UMC. I am still in that period of discernment, but I plan to share my position at the end of this series on February 18th. So mark that date.

This topic, as it relates to our congregation, poses some unique challenges. After all, our congregation (as a primarily GLBT community) has a very diverse set of needs and perspectives on committed, intimate relationships. Many of those relationships have been marginalized or not fully accepted by the institutional church or by the other social

systems of which we are a part. At the same time I believe this: the principles of love in gay or straight relationships and in romantic or plutonic relationships share a common thread. We are created to give and receive love for we are created in the image of the divine Lover, the One whom we know as Christians most fully in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. I believe our fullest manifestation of humanity is realized in loving relationships.

Therefore I am launching this new series with much fear and trembling. My scope over the next five weeks will include “partnered” love, familial love and friendship. We’ll spend three sermons on partnered love, because it is the hardest to get right, isn’t it? Can I get an amen? Then we’ll spend one Sunday each on the very important topic of love within the family and loving friendships. As preparation I have read the relationship experts that I have relied on so much in the past. These are relationship specialists such as Gary Smalley, John Gray and two that I want to share in detail with this morning – Drs. Les and Leslie Parrot. More about their model later.

First though I want to start with three texts from the Bible. The Bible in its original language was written in two languages. The Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament in the Hebrew and also in Greek called the Septuagint. The New Testament was originally written in what is called *Koine* or common Greek. Common Greek was the international language of Jesus’ day in the Mediterranean world. And when it comes to writing about love the Greeks have us beat. They have at least four ways of talking of love where in English we translate these words simply as “love.” *Eros* is physical or bargaining love, or what I call passion. You don’t find any instances of this word in your New Testament, but it’s there. The second word for love that you do find in the Bible is *storge* or family love – the love between a parent and child. The two major Greek words

for love in our Bible are *phileos* and *agape*. *Phileos* from which we derive the English words philanthropy and Philadelphia is brotherly or sisterly love; it is the word that Jesus often used for friendship. *Agape* is used frequently in our New Testament as the word that describes God's love for us that we are to imitate in loving God and neighbor. It is unconditional, willful love, that often expresses itself in self-sacrifice, such as what Jesus demonstrated to us on the cross. In a moment I will compare a kind of love triangle using three of the English words to express a model for balanced love in a partnered relationship.

I first want to read three texts that give us illustrations of three of these kinds of love. The first is *eros* love, as communicated from the Song of Solomon, chapter 2:8-14. How many of you have read from this sacred text? I have wondered for years how this text made it into the Hebrew Bible. It's the closest thing we have to soft-core porn in the Bible. I have come to understand that this steamy, love poetry is an allegory for God's passion for the people of Israel, or God's passion for humanity. Listen to these words. Her we hear the lover's excitement for her coming King Her heart races with excitement over his anticipated arrival. He is almost like a stalker outside her window (like Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* shaking the door at the wedding). The moment is fruitful for passion – the winter has passed and the rains have watered the meadow. The relationship is full of passion and fruitfulness. The hearts of the two lovers quickens with *eros* and passion. So don't think that there is no sex in the Bible. It's all over the place, but most of all in the love poetry of this Song of Solomon.

The second text I want to cite is from our gospel lesson today from John's gospel. It's the story of Jesus' first miracle in the gospel of John – the wedding at Cana of

Galilee. This is an example of *storge* or the love between a mother and grown son, between Mary and Jesus. Speaking of Mary, why do Jewish mothers make great parole officers? They never let anyone finish a sentence. A man called his mother in Florida, "Mom, how are you?" "Not too good, " said the mother. "I've been very weak." The son said, "Why are you so weak?" She said, "Because I haven't eaten in 38 days." The son said, "That's terrible. Why haven't you eaten in 38 days?" The mother answered. "Because I didn't want my mouth to be filled with food if you should call." How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb? (Sigh) "Don't bother. I'll sit in the dark. I don't want to be a nuisance to anybody." So here's the Jewish mother at this beg wedding feast and they have run out of wine. So she says to her son, "Jesus, there's no wine." You really need to have verbal tone to make this scene work. Jesus responds, "Maaah, I can't believe you're telling me this. What does this have to do with me?" But notice what the mother does next. She goes to the waiters and says, "Do what my boy tells you to do. *Just watch this.*" Jesus responds with his first recorded miracle. That's *storge* love.

Finally, let me read later in the gospel of John, chapter 15, verses 9 through 17. This soliloquy of Jesus in the gospel of John, on the night before his death, ultimately points to our relationship of friendship with God. This text, in which Jesus explains the unconditional love (or agape) commandment, points to Jesus' new relationship to his followers as one of the covenant of friendship, a mutual bond of loyalty that helps us to abide in each other as God abides in us. We are bound together in friendship. This is *phileos* love.

Drs. Parrot, the Christian relationship experts that I mentioned early, define the partnered, love relationship in a kind of love triangle that involve eros, phileos and agape love. They actual use different words in this love triangle. The three sides to this isosceles triangle are passion, intimacy, and commitment. They assert that a healthy long-term, partnered relationship must hold these loves in balance. What happens when one of these is missing or deficient? Well, if there is passion and intimacy (physical love and emotional connection) but there is no unconditional commitment, a wonderful romantic love results, but it does not have the deep roots of commitment to survive those icy nights after fights and conflicts. If you have passion and commitment, but no emotional intimacy, you have a kind of foolish love that lives only for sex and excitement, a love that cannot endure for very long. Finally if you have intimacy and commitment, you have a tired kind of friendship that lacks the fire that God wants for us to have with that one, lifetime partner. Now couples go through periods where one of these sides to their relationship suffers. The hard work of committed relationships is to constantly be in tuned to you and your partner's needs in these three areas.

Now I am no marriage expert. I have counseled about one hundred couples over the years and I have my own marriage to draw from. But I am no expert in this area. However I want to explore how to be a balanced person in a balanced, healthy relationship. There are certain external factors that we deal with every day that can knock us out of balance or drain our love resources. The ones I want to identify and deal with over the next three weeks are: a lack of focus in our time and attention in our partner; communication lapses; decoding and dealing with differing personality types, power struggles, and tapping into the Holy Spirit as a source of agape love.

In the next two weeks I will be focusing on personality types and growing in communications skills to express the language of love. This morning I want to reflect briefly how to gain control over our time and attention, dealing with power struggles, and using Christian disciplines to improve our partnerships. How many of you have a calendaring device of some kind – PDA, Daytimer, even the old paper calendar? How many of you who have partners know your partner's most alert time of day? Morning, afternoon, evening. Is your most alert time of day the same? When you get home today schedule in your calendaring device a daily time to check in with your partner. You do it for business appointments, right? Make it the most important appointment on your calendar and devote your undivided attention to this appointment. Reserve it for a time when you and your partner have the energy to give to one another. I fancy myself a multi-tasker. But I am lousy at it! Don't multi-task with your partner.

There is a power dynamic in every relationship. Usually one person possesses more power in the relationship. I believe it is rare to find a relationship in which power is equal. The power dynamic gets established early in the dating phase and it is based upon factors such as economic power, strength of personality, and level of physical attraction. Sometimes the power dynamic can shift and this is an opportunity for either conflict or growing closer together. If one partner loses a job or somehow loses prestige in the social circles in which you run, this can be enormously stressful to the relationship. Perhaps one partner receives a promotion that elevates economic power over the other partner. Be sensitive to this dynamic and the resulting fears and resentments that can arise. Most of all, practice finding peace in your own self, finding a lasting self-esteem and the power shifts will have less conflict in your love relationship.

Finally I encourage you to practice together certain spiritual disciplines that provide the means of God's grace in your relationship. You have heard the old adage, "The couple that prays together stays together." Studies show a markedly lower break-up rate among couples who regularly pray together. I can't tell you exactly how it works but it does. I am not talking about the rote prayer at the dinner table. I am talking about intimate, vulnerable conversation with God lifted up as a couple. Somehow it just binds us closer together, particularly when we pray for the needs of each other. Try it. It has mystical powers. I think it is also important to have worship time together. I am aware that many of you have partners that don't come to church together. They may be members of other churches, synagogues or no church at all. I am not asking you to coerce your partner to come to Bering. That may be a source of conflict itself. But try to find a time to worship together – to find awe in God's creation, to marvel at the love of the Divine lover, and to express freely the adoration you have for God and one another. This may not be a regular opportunity for you to enjoy. But at least set a goal to get away as a couple for a retreat once a year to enjoy each other and enjoy God.

God wants you to have lasting relationships that make you whole, relationships that are holy. God created us a social creatures, as creatures who desire loving relationships with each other and the divine. I pray today that you find, strengthen or reclaim the love that lasts a lifetime.