

The Living Flame of Love (Song of Songs 8:6-7)

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

Elkin Presbyterian Church

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Do not stir up love until it is ready. For the third and final time in the Song of Songs we have this word of caution offered to us? Do not stir up love until it is ready. What does this strange warning mean to us? I guess it all depends on what we mean by love. In high school I remember reading a book called the Four Loves by the British theologian CS Lewis. In the Four Loves Lewis declares that the English language often employs just the one word, the word love to describe many different kinds of love. But in the original Greek language of the NT there are four different words used to carefully describe the four kinds of love. The Greek word Storge describes what we call in English affection. Affection covers a wide range of objects-we might feel affection for an acquaintance, a pet or even an old pair of slippers. Philios is the Greek word for friendship the second kind of love that CS Lewis lifts up. Philios friendship is the love shared between kindred spirits who are united in their values, sharing a common response to the world around them. Eros the third kind of love is that special passionate bond between romantic lovers. But eros is more than that as CS Lewis writes. Eros is also found throughout life in our desire and appreciation for beauty in all its forms and in our own passionate longing to be fulfilled in life. Finally there is agape, the love that is sacrificial. The kind of love we see most clearly in Christ who was willing to suffer for the least, the lost, the last. In high school in the fervor of adolescence it seemed to me that these four loves were a kind of hierarchy a ladder to be ascended to the most god-like love. Agape. And on that ladder we were not to dawdle too long at eros for it was a dangerous love. But if I had read CS Lewis more carefully I would have understood that God is the source of all kinds of love. And that really each love that animates our heart is a subtle mixture of all these loves. It is perhaps helpful though as we drink the chalice of love that we are able to distinguish and savor love's different flavors. And this is why the SOS is so important because it is the place in the Bible that reminds us that eros too is a gift from God. It is erotic love that stirs the human heart for the beauty of the divine being. The SOS reminds us that our passionate desire for God for life, for intimacy is a God –given blessing. But for the third and final time we have heard the warning, do not stir up love until it is ready. Am I ready I ask myself? Am I ready at this late stage in my life to more fully know God's love? As your preacher, I ask you: are you ready? For once love is aroused we must rouse as well. Once love is awake, we must awaken. In the deepest possible sense. For love asks everything of us.

Our text this morning begins with these words: Set me as a seal upon your heart. Throughout the Song of Songs we have the listened to language describing the union of the human heart with God in the very graphic imagery of erotic love-making. And I know this has been a stretch for some of you. But for many lovers of God, saints throughout the history of the church have found here in the Song of Songs the only language that comes close to describing their experience of knowing God. Could knowing God really mean not just head knowledge of doctrine about God but our passionate union with God in such a way that we become one with God with one will, one life, one heart? The Hebrew word to “know” is also the word for sexual intercourse as in Adam knew his wife Eve. Could it be that knowing God can be like the passion of sexual union? One of those lovers of God was St. Teresa of Avila. St. Teresa was a mystic of 16th century Spain whose writings on the spiritual life are still studied in the church as spiritual classics. In

her autobiography Teresa described a vision of an angel appearing to her. The angel was very beautiful Teresa writes. His face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angels who seem to be all afire. They must be those who are called the seraphim (which means – the “fiery ones”). In his hands I saw a long golden spear and the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing my heart out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans”. In your bulletin I included a photograph of the famous statue in Rome by the sculptor Bernini, depicting this vision entitled the Ecstasy of St. Teresa. It was shocking then as it may still be to see a saint in such a sensuous pose of passionate consummation. The Bernini statue portrays a beautiful Teresa in ecstasy. This summer while I was at the monastery, I happened to be speaking with one of the monks about this very statue of a beautiful St. Teresa. And he reminded me that the real Teresa was short and stocky and not at all as attractive as the statue portrayed her. Which left the monk and me wondering for just a moment: Did Bernini in sculpting this statue of a beautiful Teresa mislead us in making Teresa more attractive than she was? Or could it be as this monk suggested that this is how God saw Teresa, how God sees all of us. No matter how we might see ourselves. God sees us as beautiful.

The Song of Songs continues: Love is as strong as death. Passion as fierce as the grave. Why does the Song compare the power of love to the power of death? Stephanie Paulson a theologian at Harvard writes that she “remembered standing at the back of the church on my wedding day, looking down the aisle at my husband-to-be, and suddenly knowing, - really knowing that one day I would die. She writes: there was something about being on the cusp of making a life-long promise to intertwine my life with another that made me feel my mortality in my bones. We were pledging ourselves to one another for a life-time and one day we would have to say good-bye. Maybe others have felt that as we too have said our wedding vows, “for better or worse, richer or poorer, etc. till death do us part”. Love is as strong as death. Passion as fierce as the grave. Life does not go on forever. But as the Song suggests, maybe love does. Maybe that is what Mary Magdalene understood when she heard the Risen Christ call her by name in the garden of the empty tomb. Love is as strong as death. Passion more fierce than the grave. Maybe that was what St. Paul understood when he triumphantly proclaimed that there is nothing in life and nothing in death that can separate us from the love of God.

Love is as strong as death. Passion as fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire. A most vehement flame. Fire of course has deep roots as a biblical symbol. There is the burning bush of Moses which symbolizes the divine passion of the Creator who is moved by the cries of slaves in Egypt and enters history to liberate them. In Jesus own words: “I have come to set the world on fire. How I wish the blaze was ignited!” And of course the early followers of Jesus were anointed by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and it seemed like flames danced upon their heads. Pascal the great Christian thinker wrote in his journal on Nov. 23, 1654, “from 10:30 until 12:30: Fire!” Poets and mystics like the British priest Gerard Manley Hopkins have experienced this divine fire erupting in all created things. In one of my favorite poems by Hopkins entitled the Grandeur of God he wrote of “kingfishers catching fire, dragonflies drawing flame”. In the eyes of the poet and the person of faith who has eyes to see, everything glows with the fiery energy of the divine. It is written about one of the early followers of St. Francis of Assisi a brother by the name of Giovanni, that when he listened to Francis speak of God, he felt his heart would melt like wax

near a fire. And the love of God so enflamed him that he could not stand still and endure it. He would get up and as if drunk in the Spirit would wander about the garden, the woods, the church talking as the flame moved him. Perhaps you have heard of the great love between St. Francis and St. Clare, his spiritual sister. Clare came to visit Francis one day and into the evening around the campfire they engaged in holy and passionate conversation about their love of God, their love for one another and their love for creation. And that very night, the people of Assisi looked beyond the walls of the town, across the plain and toward the forest where the Franciscan community lived. And they saw a red and orange glow as if a great fire was raging. They rushed out of the city to put out the fire only to discover Francis and Clare sitting and talking to one another about the love of God.

Many of you may recall that Bishop Michael Curry formerly of the Episcopal dioceses of NC and now arch-bishop of the Episcopalian church in the US, was invited by Prince Harry and Megan Markle to preach the sermon at their royal wedding in Westminster Cathedral in May. So just for a moment imagine that you are a guest at the Royal Wedding and you are now listening to Bishop Curry wedding homily on this very text from The Song of Songs. 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. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. Quoting Bishop Curry's sermon: "The late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr once said: "We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way." There's power in love. Don't underestimate it. Don't even over-sentimentalize it. There's power, power in love. If you don't believe me, think about a time when you first fell in love. The whole world seemed to center around you and your beloved. Oh there's power, power in love. Not just in its romantic forms, but any form, any shape of love. There's a certain sense in which when you are loved, and you know it, when someone cares for you, and you know it, when you love and you show it - it actually feels right. There is something right about it. And there's a reason for it. The reason has to do with the source. We were made by a power of love, and our lives were meant - and are meant - to be lived in that love. That's why we are here. Ultimately, the source of love is God himself: the source of all of our lives".

"The New Testament says it this way: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God. Those who do not love do not know God. Why? For God is love." There's power in love. There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can. There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There's power in love to show us the way to live. Set me as a seal on your heart... a seal on your arm, for love is as strong as death. But love is not only about a young couple. Two young people fell in love, and we all showed up here (for their wedding). But it's not just for and about a young couple, who we rejoice with. It's more than that. Jesus of Nazareth on one occasion was asked by a lawyer to sum up the essence of the teachings of Moses and Jesus said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." Someone once said that Jesus began the most revolutionary movement in human history. A movement grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world - and a movement mandating people to live that love, and in so doing to change not only their lives but the very life of the world itself".

“If you don't believe me, just stop and imagine Bishop Curry proclaims: Think and imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families where love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce where this love is the way. Imagine this tired old world where love is the way. When love is the way - unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive. When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary for life. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more. When love is the way, there's plenty good room - plenty good room - for all of God's children. Because when love is the way, we actually treat each other, well... like we are actually family. When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all, and we are brothers and sisters, children of God. My brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new world, a new human family”.

“And let me tell you something, old Solomon was right in the Old Testament: that love is fire. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin - French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin was arguably one of the great minds, great spirits of the 20th century. Jesuit, Roman Catholic priest, scientist, a scholar, a mystic. – (I quoted Teilhard in my first sermon in this series). In some of his writings, he said, from his scientific background as well as his theological one, in some of his writings he said - as others have - that the discovery, or invention, or harnessing of fire was one of the great scientific and technological discoveries in all of human history. Fire to a great extent made human civilization possible. Fire made it possible to cook food and to provide sanitary ways of eating which reduced the spread of disease in its time. Fire made it possible to heat warm environments and thereby made human migration around the world a possibility, even into colder climates. Fire made (human civilization) possible. Teilhard de Chardin said fire was one of the greatest discoveries in all of human history. And he then went on to say that if humanity ever harnesses the energy of fire again, if humanity ever captures the energy of love - it will be the second time in history that we have discovered fire”.