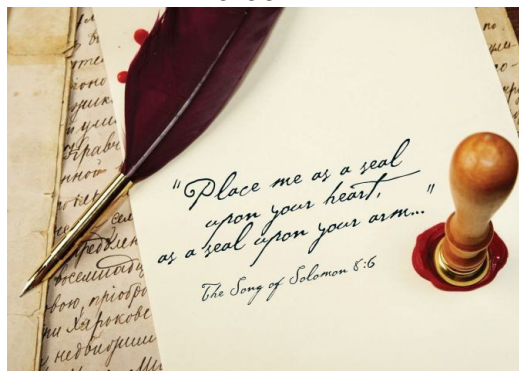


**Second Congregational Church in Newcastle, United Church of Christ
Newcastle, Maine**

**The 7th Sunday After Pentecost
Online Worship – July 19, 2020
10:00 AM**



*“Set me as a seal upon your heart,
As a seal upon your arm...”
Song of Solomon 8:6*

INVITATION

Welcome to Virtual Worship with the community of Second Congregational Church in Newcastle, United Church of Christ in Newcastle, Maine. From our various spaces, on our various devices, we enter sacred time together. No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here. God meets us everywhere and in all our humanness. Be here in this sacred moment. God is with you. God is with us. May this worship of saints be blessed, be nourishing, be comforting, be church.

PREPARING FOR WORSHIP:

As we gather, please be sure that your device (computer, phone or tablet) is in the mute mode to avoid feedback and background noise. You are encouraged to use the “chat” or “comment” features to offer prayer requests at any time during the service.

Before the time of the service you may want to prepare a simple worship space. Perhaps you can light a candle or have a Bible with you or set in place some other symbol of faith that brings you comfort. Perhaps an outdoor element – a flower, leaf or branch - helps you to spiritually focus. Perhaps you would like to include the photograph of someone you wish to bring into the circle of faith. Whatever it is, follow your heart.

***Thank you for your preparation.
Let us now be present to the Spirit
which brings us together and loves us where we are!***

+ + + + +

GATHERING MUSIC

**“Variations on Amazing Grace”
Jane Wilmot, Organ**

Raymond Haan

Link: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wN55NzszazaV-t_Awz30oGE_cPu1YE_2/view?usp=sharing

WELCOME & CENTERING MOMENT

CALL TO WORSHIP¹ *(said aloud together but muted):*
God has set this day before us,
A day set apart, a day of rest and praise.
God has set our lives before us,
A span of years in which we love, and learn, and serve.
God has set God's seal upon our hearts,
So that we might live fully in deep love.
Let us worship God.

OPENING HYMN 410

“Just as I Am”

Woodworth

(Music is pre-recorded by Peter Asche with our Second Singers Choir and with Jane Wilmot on organ. We will remain muted to avoid audio feedback and lags. Please sing aloud at home or follow along as best as you are able. Remember, it's our spiritual intention that matters!).

Just As I Am

1. Just as I am, — with — out — one plea but that — your
 2. Just as I am, — though tossed a — bout with man — y a
 3. Just as I am, — you will — re — ceive, will wel — come,
 4. Just as I am, — your love — un — known has bro — ken

6
 blood was shed for me, and that you called in — vit — ing
 con — flict, many a doubt, fight — ings and fears with — in, with —
 par — don, cleanse, re — lieve; be — cause your prom — ise I be —
 ev — 'ry bar — rier down; now to be yours, and yours a —

12
 me, — O Lamb of God, — I come, I come!
 out, — O Lamb of God, — I come, I come!
 lieve, O Lamb of God, — I come, I come!
 lone, O Lamb of God, — I come, I come!

Link: https://drive.google.com/file/d/136DBWSvPnRh4i6o_zaTAK4zIJ77Z7bdB/view?usp=sharing

¹ Today's Call to Worship was written by Beth Merrill Neel, at <https://holdfasttowhatisgood.com/liturgy/random-liturgy/>. Visited on July 13, 2020.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION – *(said aloud together but muted;)*

**Holy One, you know us already.
Help us to know you better.
Let us see you all around us.
Fill our worship with your Spirit
so that we may learn to recognize
your presence in all places. Amen.**

THE LORD’S PRAYER *(said out loud together but muted):*

(Second Church follows the version of the Lord’s Prayer that is offered below. However, you are invited to say this prayer aloud in the tradition that brings you the most comfort: debt/debtors; sins/sin; trespasses/trespass).

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

SCRIPTURE: The Song of Solomon 8: 6-7:

Reader: Mary Bausch

⁶ 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.
⁷ Many 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.

MEDITATION “Allegory, Metaphors and the Power of Love” Pastor Char Corbett

Today we are into our sixth week of a 10-week summer sermon series, exploring five texts of the Old Testament that are frequently ignored or overlooked by our Christian tradition. These books, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Song of Songs, Ruth and Esther, are known as the Five Festival Scrolls by our Jewish brothers and sisters. In both traditions, these books have been disputed and challenged for their inclusion in our sacred canons. Early church leaders, rabbis and biblical scholars attempted to define them as confusing, too sexy, overtly depressing or even tasteless because they acknowledge women resisting patriarchy or minority voices loudly protesting the abuses of government and even divine power.

Yet over the millennia, these five books have prevailed, offering their wisdom, stories, poems and lessons if we but seek them. Their powerful and timeless truths lie in their ability to

reveal and question the theological complexities and human realities of living, suffering, loving, rejoicing and dying in this messy and often unjust world.

So today we continue our exploration, considering the Song of Solomon, or the Song of Songs, as it's known in the Jewish tradition. This is our second week of looking at this curious and erotic book.

Certainly, the Song of Solomon can be regarded as yet another love story that is as old as time and, as has been noted in our Wednesday night Bible Study group, reads more like a steamy romance novel than it does holy scripture. Modern biblical and literature scholars have certainly thought so, as they've analyzed the book as an example of exotic love poetry, much like the Arabic *wasf* poetry found in ancient literature. These interpreters view the Song as poetry that uplifts the gifts and blessings of human sexuality and mutual love.

The Songs can also be read as poetic allegory, revealing the passionate love God has for humanity, and that's what we'll be reflecting on today. In fact, it's because of this very revelation that the great teacher and mystic Rabbi Akiba argued with the ancient rabbis of the 1st century C.E. who tried to ban the Song of Songs as no more than a raunchy drinking song. He said, "The whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies."²

Later Christian mystics of the Middle Ages believed that the Song of Songs evokes for the faithful the soul's deep desire and longing for God. In the mutuality of such sacred, deep love, God wishes to hold us close, love us unconditionally and never let us go. This "courtship with God" is meant to draw our souls closer into relationship with the Holy One who calls us "beloved."

Many scholars quote Bernard of Clairveaux as unafraid of using erotic language to describe his soul's longing for God, quoting Song of Songs 2:1: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" For Bernard, that kiss is not something dirty, but rather the perfect metaphor for the possibility of our mystical union with God in prayer. Reading the Song, he said, can lead the "thirsting soul" to rediscover the power of love, to redirect our love back to God and, through the direct experience of God's grace, restore our ability to love others.³

² Mishnah Yadayim 3:5

³ In "*How Mystics Hear the Song*," by Dennis Tucker, Jr. © 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics.

It's my guess that in today's faithful circles, the metaphor of falling in love is not the imagery most of us would associate with our prayer life, our relationship with God or with the church. But what if we did try to read this text as a poetic, metaphorically charged song of praise to the love of God for Israel, for the Church and for us?

These wonderful, passionate images in the Song, if understood as an expression of God, reveals a God who is active and determined and seeks to know us, right? Doesn't our faith profess a God who loves us so much that God doesn't wait for us to love God first? God, who comes to us in the person of Jesus as an act of Love. And that love is costly, consuming and passionate. Our God is not dispassionate, distant and detached, riding on a cloud above the heavens. God is much more like a passionate lover who looks for us, desires us, wants us day and night.

A wonderful book that has helped me appreciate and understand such a love relationship with God is the book, *"Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from The East and West,"* as translated by Daniel Ladinsky. This is a collection of poems by twelve "timeless spiritual writers," including Christian writers St. Catherine of Siena, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross, as well as writers of other faith traditions such as Hafiz (a Sufi poet), Rumi (a Persian poet), Mira (an Indian poet) and Kabir (who blends the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian traditions.). I'd like to read several of the short poems:

We'll begin with the poem *"What Is Grace?"* by St. John of the Cross:

"What is grace?" I asked God.
And He said, "All that happens."
Then He added, when I looked perplexed,
"Could not lovers say that every moment in their lover's arms was grace?
Existence is my arms..."

Hafiz, a 14th Century Persian poet, is still not that well-known in the West. But some poets such as Emerson and Goethe loved him. Goethe even wrote that "Hafiz has no peer." Here is an excerpt from a poem by Hafiz entitled *"Each Soul Completes Me."*

My
Beloved said,
“My name is not complete without yours....
I am made whole by your life. Each soul,
each soul
completes me.”

Living in the 16th Century, St. Teresa of Avila is “the most influential female saint in the West.” She bemoaned the gloom that sometimes pervades the Christian religion. In one poem she says she heard God say to her, “Enjoy me.” Those two words changed her life forever. Here is another poem of hers entitled “*Not yet Tickled.*”

How did those priests ever get so serious
and preach all that
gloom?
I don't think God tickled them yet.
Beloved—Hurry.

When we think of St. Thomas Aquinas, we think of the many tomes of theology he wrote. But this little poem reveals another side of this great theologian. It's called “*His Choir.*”

Sing, my tongue: sing my hand:
Sing, my feet, my knee,
my loins, my
whole body.
Indeed I am His
choir.

I will conclude with part of a poem by the great 14th Century Dominican saint, Catherine of Siena. It's entitled “*Smells of Good Food.*” Catherine begins by describing how, as a little girl, she would wait eagerly for her father to come home from work. When he appears, she says:

I saw him coming.
we ran into each other's arms
and he lifted me
as he so often had—
twirled me through the air
his hands beneath my arms.
This is what the Truth does:
lifts and lets us
fly.

How wonderful is our faith – to celebrate and worship and serve a God who comes to us in so many ways and images and with such deep longing and passionate love – and uses even us to express that love in the world to others.

To imagine God as lover changes the dynamic of the Christian life dramatically. God is “in love” with us. We are precious in God’s sight and honored. We are the beloved of God. That’s who we are in relationship to God – we are lovers too. God yearns for us. The relationship is intended to be mutual and intimate.

As the author and theologian Roberta Bondi puts it, “God is besotted with us.”⁴ For just a minute, think how your life would be different if you knew, at the deepest core of your being, that God is besotted with you, that God yearns for you, yearns that you turn and be in relationship with God as the beloved of God. Imagine how different the world would be if we could look at one another, all living things, as created in God’s image, with that much love and devotion?

While jailed by the Nazis in Tegel Prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge, counseling him on how to hold all the scattered pieces of life together during the stresses and actual bombings of war. In the letter, he revealed that he had been meditating on the Song of Songs and how it spoke to him of human love and divine love. Bonhoeffer found great comfort in the book and wrote that “nothing calamitous can happen” when we are loved by such an “ardent, passionate, sensual love as is portrayed here.” How simply wonderful that a passage spoke to him so well of God’s love – how much comfort he found and then gave away – and all from a book of the Bible that doesn’t even mention God’s name or presence!

So, what are your metaphors for God? God is like....what? I always answer God is Love. That’s my go-to. But I took the time this week to try on some new metaphors, ones I hadn’t tried before, to see if I could capture what God’s character is for me. And this is what I came up with, my short list, which I’m still working on.

God is like a cat that’s curled up, purring in your lap as soon as you sit down.

God is like my Dog Murphy, who never fails to greet me at the door, tail wagging, with a shoe, or a blanket, or a toy, to say I love you and I’m so glad you’re home!”

God is like the rain, that drenches me, clings to me, nourishes me, washes away the dirt and helps me to grow.

⁴ Bondi, Roberta C. *“To Love As God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church.”* Fortress Press, 1987.

God is like a grandma who puts on a complete Blow Up Barney costume so she can dash from the car to hug her grandkids during Covid Days.

God is like the woman who sat on the floor next to the sobbing mom and her autistic son, who was tantruming in the grocery store.

God is like a chickadee, just outside my window and constantly calling to me, inviting me to listen again and again.

God is like my lover, the one that holds my head, caresses my temple and tells me it's okay to sleep, for my nightmares may feel real but it's Love that is true.

May we forever write and read love poems to God without blushing. May we always seek to express our love for God through writings, songs, prayers, paintings, art, acts of kindness, the pursuit of justice and in the humble ways we try to live. May we do our best and keep searching to find the metaphors and names of God that express our praise, reverence and gratitude. May we always passionately and joyfully love God, love our neighbors and find love in ourselves. Amen.

MUSIC

“How Fair and How Pleasant Art Thou”

by Marcel Dupre

Jane Wilmot, organ

Link: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wtVUII2pEhYAdXPSP_eObMiRcnj6I98A/view?usp=sharing

SILENT PRAYERS AND PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:⁵

[NOTE: You are invited to type your prayer requests in the “Chat” or “Comment” features of your online device or to name those you pray for aloud in your own sacred space. PLEASE BE PRUDENT and do not share last names or specific, sensitive information on on-line platforms, as we can unknowingly increase an individual's vulnerability in our stated care].

Wonderful God, God of laughter and promises, the Source of joy and Source of hope, hear our prayers: We are mindful of those who do not know the beauty of friendship and community, the calm of daily bread, the peace of life without violence or war. So we lift up to you those people around us and in the world who suffer this day – the poor, the hungry, those facing rampant disease. We lift up to you, Present One, those who experience violence every day as well as places torn apart by war and conflict and by natural disaster. Help us to follow your example, and to help as we can.

We are mindful of those in our community who are wracked with worry and anxiety – about their health of the health of those they love; about work and finances; about their kids' well-being and their education and their social lives and the family they are missing in this continued time of caution and separation. May you continue to be the still small voice in the midst of this viral storm, reminding us all to breathe in peace and to trust in You.

⁵ Prayers of the People adapted from a “A Sunday Morning Prayer,” written by Beth Merrill Neel, at <https://holdfasttowhatisgood.com/liturgy/random-liturgy/>. Visited July 13, 2020.

We continue to pray by offering the joys and concerns of our hearts ...*(Pastor Char will lift up prayers submitted here)*... Most especially, Compassionate One, we give you thanks for this time set apart to worship. We lift up to you all our praise for the good in life and for the struggles that help us to grow; we lift up to you that which we cannot name aloud. We lift up to you our hearts, knowing that you have had them all along.

BLESSING OF GIFTS RECEIVED AND GIVEN⁶ *(Pastor Char):*

Let us take this moment to reflect on the tangible and intangible gifts we have received from God and others this week and the ways in which we have shared our gifts of love, support, care, time and resources with others... (Silent Reflection).

Church members, friends and visitors are invited to continue their pledges or to give freely to Second Church's ministries by going to our website, www.secondcongo.org and making a donation through Givelify or PayPal. Checks payable to Second Congregational Church can also be mailed to Second Congregational Church UCC, PO Box 243, Newcastle, ME 04553.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING: *(Said out loud together, but muted):*

Spirit of us all, through these offerings we are co-creators of peace and justice with You. We join You in concern for all people, naming them as our brothers and sisters. We return these gifts of our material resources and our time to extend Your grace into this moment in history and into Your world. Thank You for this privilege. Amen.

DOXOLOGY: *Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God, for all that love has done
Creator, Christ and Spirit, One. Amen.*

Link: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zf9vXKaxxAb6dJhE3Z67dlc0oJK5rC3W/view?usp=sharing>

CLOSING HYMN 330 "You Are Called to Tell the Story" Regent Square (NEXT PAGE)
(Music is pre-recorded by Peter Asche, with the Second Singers Choir and Jane Wilmot on organ. We will remain muted to avoid audio feedback and lags. Please sing aloud at home or follow along as best as you are able. Remember, it's our spiritual intention that matters!).

BENEDICTION

**Go now with your hope set on Christ.
As Lovers of God, let the Spirit lead you
and let your beauty and faith shine like the sun
until darkness and light are one.
We go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.**

VIRTUAL COFFEE HOUR CHECK IN (ZOOM ONLY)

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Today's Worship has been prepared, sent out, offered and led by:

- ▶ **Peter Asche**, Music Assistant and "Second Singers' Technical Mixologist
- ▶ **Bill Bausch**, Communications & Technology Support; Snippets Meister
- ▶ **Rev. Char Corbett**, Pastor
- ▶ **Jim Corbett**, Videographer, Zoom and Facebook Live Host
- ▶ **Carole Blanton**, Altar Floral Arrangement
- ▶ **Jane Wilmot**, Minister of Music

⁶ Prayer of Blessings and Thanksgiving have been written by Rev. Char Corbett, 7/13/2020.

YOU ARE CALLED TO TELL THE STORY

1. You are called to tell the sto - ry, pass - ing words of
 2. You are called to teach the rhy - thm of the dance that
 3. You are called to set the tab - le, bless - ing bread as
 4. May the One whose love is broad - er than the mea - sure

life a - long, then to blend your voice with oth - ers
 nev - er ends; then to move with - in the cir - cle,
 Je - sus blessed; then to come with thirst and hun - ger,
 of all space; give us words to sing the sto - ry,

as you sing the sa - cred song. Christ be known in
 hand in hand with stran - gers, friends. Christ be known in
 need - ing care like all the rest. Christ be known in
 move a - mong us in this place. Christ be known in

all our sing - ing, fill - ing all with songs of love.
 all our danc - ing, touch - ing all with hands of love.
 all our shar - ing, feed - ing all with signs of love.
 all our liv - ing, fill - ing all with gifts of love.

Link: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aMy3II2RQKTsJVHzYdX1F3gHqeVGA4vC/view?usp=sharing>

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