***A LOVE SONG***

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Texts: Song of Solomon 8:6-7 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

 Rock and Roll, Opera, Country, Jazz, Rap, Hip-Hop, Bluegrass, Soul, Ska, Heavy Metal, Pop, Blues, Gospel – there seems to be an almost endless list of musical genres from which to choose these days, whether on iTunes, Spotify, XM Sirius radio, your CD player, or your old 8-Track cassette player. Each generation finds new ways to express itself in song; new styles emerge, old styles fade away, and some styles endure as *Golden Oldies*. Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but sweet music is in the ear of each listener. Your favorite song may set my teeth on edge, and my favorite tune may be to your ears no more than a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. The melodies may differ, but there is one theme that cuts across all genres, one kind of song that is sung in some form in each – a love song. In wildly different styles with wildly different messages each genre has a niche for songs that speak of love. Some of you may recall

 Harry James and His Orchestra hitting the charts in the 40s with

 “You Made Me Love You (I Didn’t Want to Do it),” or

 Nat King Cole crooning

 “Mona Lisa” in the 50s, or

 Ray Charles singing

 “I Can’t Stop Loving You” in the 60s.

 From Motown, The Jackson Five contribute

 “I’ll Be There” and

 Stevie Wonder writes

 “You Are the Sunshine of My Life.”

 More recently, Beyoncé has

 “Crazy in Love” and

Taylor Swift sings

 “You Are in Love.”

 And even Metallica offers

 “Nothing Else Matters.”

 On country stations Willie Nelson warbles

 “Always On My Mind” and “Blue Eyes Cryin’ In the Rain” and

 Kenny Chesney hits the charts with

 “Take Her Home”

We might be wise to skip some of the lesser-known love songs like

 “An Old Flame Can’t Hold a Candle to You” and

 “Billy Broke My Heart at Walgreens and I Cried All the Way to Sears.”

But perhaps it is all best summed up by

Huey Lewis and the News when they sang, “The Power of Love”

for it is the power of love that finds expression in song for all generations and all kinds of music lovers.

 In Scripture too we have love songs, most notably The Song of Solomon from which I read a few moments ago, a collection of love poems relating the steamy exchange between a man and a woman. That passage that begins, “Set me as a seal upon your heart” is often read at weddings; the other erotic portions, not so much! But there are other love songs in the Bible, and perhaps none is as well-known or oft-repeated as the song we heard today from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Like that passage from the Song of Solomon, its words are most often heard amid the

 flowers and photographers,

 friends, family, and soon-to-be family at weddings.

It is chosen more often than any other biblical passage for weddings, for it speaks so eloquently of love. Unlike The Song of Solomon which sings of the sensual love shared by young lovers, Paul speaks to the Corinthians of a broader love – *agapé* love – which is to mark ***all*** our lives and ***all*** our relationships, including those of spouses, parent and child, friends and strangers.

 Paul knows the Christians in Corinth to whom he writes. He knows their strengths and weaknesses, the issues that unite them and those that divide them, the questions that burn in their hearts and those that find their way to their lips. Over the past couple of weeks, we have heard him address some of those issues that arose around spiritual gifts and essential parts of the body as the Corinthians struggled with the diversity of those gifts while trying to understand how all of them could be equally essential. Some of the Corinthians were verireligious, holier-than-God Christians who held at a distance all those who they worried might taint their polished halos. They were uncomfortable with anything or anyone who did not practice religion exactly as they did. They had created a hierarchy of gifts, and speaking in tongues was at the top of the list. They were boldly self-righteous in their religious trappings, yet in their lives they tolerated or endorsed illicit sex, greed, and idolatry. They were like those Christians today who put in their hour in worship on Sunday mornings, then serve their own selfish interests the rest of the week and think they are still being faithful. To the Corinthians and to verireligious Virginians, Paul speaks this word of love:

 *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

Those who spoke in tongues but lacked love were just a noisy irritation, no holier than the pagan worshipers down the street. Without love spiritual gifts are no gifts; faith without love is no faith; ministry without love is no ministry. You may do good deeds, but without love they fall short of divine value. If I serve meals at a soup kitchen, but have not love, I gain nothing but dishpan hands. If I visit the sick without love, if I teach without love, if I sing in the choir without love, if I serve the church or the community 24 hours a day, but have not love, I still am nothing. For, at the core of all these acts of mercy and faithfulness is love.

 In his book, *Civility*, Yale Law Professor Stephen Carter argues that our public life – our politics, our culture and our country – have suffered from a lack of discourse and action rooted in love for one another. He writes:

 *Conservatism teaches us to worship our property, liberalism teaches us to love our rights. Both teach us to worship ourselves, but neither one teaches us to yield our own desires for the sake of others…In a nation where both discourse and behavior are dominated by the political ethic of* ***victory-at-any-cost*** *and the market ethic of* ***getting- mine****, where do we learn to put aside our own desires and even needs for the sake of the larger good?*

And then he answers:

 *We go to our churches, our synagogues, our mosques, and our temples. In short, we go to God…The ethic of neighbor-love that has sustained both Christianity and Judaism has long called on believers to sacrifice for those we do not know.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

 Paul would agree. Love is not some motivating idea or abstract emotion; it is concrete action. It is not a warm feeling of fondness within us; it is action toward others as God in Christ has acted toward us. In the movie “Shadowlands” C.S. Lewis, played by Anthony Hopkins, describes love as wanting to take another’s suffering upon yourself. In Jesus Christ, God has done just that. In love God has taken suffering from our shoulders and has borne it on the cross on Calvary. The love that is to undergird our lives is that kind of self-giving love.

 The story is told of such love in one of the Nazi labor camps. Workers there were assigned tasks, and given tools for their labors; inventories were taken at the conclusion of the day’s work. Upon return from one project the Nazi officer in charge found that a shovel was missing. “Who took the shovel?” he demanded. “Who took the shovel?” No one came forward. “Then I will shoot you one by one until the culprit confesses,” he announced. As the officer prepared to execute his first victim, a young Jew stepped forward. “I took the shovel,” he declared. He was promptly executed as an example to the prisoners. Only later did the officer discover that he had miscounted; all the shovels were accounted for. The young man, falsely accused and unjustly executed, had acted purely out of self-giving love to save the lives of his co-workers.

 Such is the love shared with us in Jesus Christ. Such is the love we are called to share with one another. It is love that is as patient as the love of a mother feeding her infant in the middle of the night and as kind as the father who feeds a hungry stranger in the middle of the day. It is the patience of turning the other cheek to an enemy and the kindness of forgiving a tormentor. It is not materialistic; diamonds, flowers, and chocolates are not its measure. It is humble, like the one who was born in a stable manger and died on a cross that we might live. It regards all others as equals – not just all others who are like us, but ***all*** others including the obnoxious neighbor and the total stranger and the undocumented immigrant in our land; it looks first to their needs instead of our own. It is made tangible in our care and concern for friends, family, and strangers alike. Without love for them, we are unfaithful; we are nothing!

 Our society will pass away. Our possessions will not last forever, and no, you can’t take them with you. Even spiritual gifts will be no more, says Paul. Love alone endures. Not only within time, but beyond time, love endures for nothing, not even death, can separate us from God’s love. In love, we can bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things – ALL THINGS – including the challenges of these tumultuous times in which we live. Love makes that possible. So faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is the song sung not only by mortals but also by angels: a song which is love! Amen

1. Stephen Carter, *Civility*, Basic Books, 1998, pp.96-97 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)