

1 Sermon, July 28, 2013

Texts: Song of Solomon 2:1-12, 1 Timothy 5:1-14

Title: "Pleasure and Commitment"

1. Many kinds of love – a look in the Hebrew Scriptures
2. Hesed
3. The remaining kinds of love are all mixed together in Song of Songs
4. Raya
5. Ahava
6. Dod
7. Our love should include all of the above

1. Many kinds of love – a look in the Hebrew Scriptures

The English language has a tremendous wealth of words: words we've borrowed from many other languages.

But in some cases, one word is asked to do the work of many words. That's the case with the word "love."

We use that same word love when I say "I love pizza" as when I say "I love Marianne." We use the same word to represent a relationship with one's spouse as one's child or parent – and those loves are very different.

We use the word to talk about God, too. It can get confusing.

We use the word love when we talk about a lover whose relationship is primarily physical, and we use it to talk about relationships that involve hardly any touching at all.

The Bible has less confusion about this. There are a number of terms used that speak of different kinds of love. The terms overlap somewhat, but we can get a lot of insight by looking at the distinctions between types of love. I'm going to use the Hebrew words in the Old Testament, and not the Greek words from the New Testament, although the words in Greek are similar in meaning.

2. Hesed – steadfast love

The first kind of love that I want to talk about is Hesed, the word most often used for God's love for human beings. It is often translated steadfast love or loyalty. It has to do with God's covenant with God's people and God's faithfulness in carrying it out. Deuteronomy 7 says:

And because you listen to these commandments, and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the *Hesed* which he swore to your fathers to keep; he will love you, bless you, and multiply you (Deut 7:12)

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In Genesis, Isaac prays a prayer to God asking for God's love:
And Isaac said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show *hesed* to my master Abraham.
(Genesis 24:12)

In 1 Samuel, Jonathan, David's friend, asks David:
"If I am still alive, show me the *hesed* of the LORD;" 1 Samuel
20:14, NRSV.

3. The remaining kinds of love are all mixed together in Song of Songs

Hesed is a word mostly used about the love of God for people. But there are other words used for the love of people. These next three appear in the Song of Songs – more on that later.

4. Raya

The first of these is *Raya*, which could be translated as friendship. Having *raya* for someone means being a companion or someone you share things with. *Raya* means you share ideas, experiences, hopes and dreams.

In Judges, Jephthah's daughter said to her father:
Grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains with my companions." (Judges 11:37)

In Deut 13:7, the phrase is used: "Your friend, who is as your own soul."

5. Ahava

The next word, *ahava*, is the word for love which speaks of commitment and connection. *Ahava* is a love of the will and that it is more profound than just fleeting romantic feelings. It is a desire which leads a person to make a decision to join their life to another forever. It is what makes things last. The lovers in the Song of Songs state that *Ahava* is as strong as death, that many rivers cannot quench *Ahava* (Song of Songs 8:7).

Ahava means "to provide for and protect" as well as to have "an intimacy of action and emotion".

Jesus quoted Deuteronomy when he said: "You shall *ahava* the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. And you shall *ahava* your neighbor as yourself."

When I took modern Hebrew in college, it was this verb that was used for romantic love; More than friendship, not necessary sexual. *Ani Ohevet Marianne*.

Ahava means commitment; intentional relationship. Proverbs 10 tells us:

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Hatred stirs up strife, but *ahava* covers all offenses. (Proverbs 10:12)

Sometimes the word *ahava* is even used for the committed love of God. Isaiah 63 tells us:

"...in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." (Isaiah 63:9, NRSV)

6. Dod

The last word for love that I will share is a love that could be translated as Passion. The Hebrew word is "*Dod*." *Dod* means to carouse, rock or to fondle (Song of Songs 1:2). *Dod* is the passion and the romantic feelings that are a part of a love relationship, the physical, sexual part.

Proverbs 7:18 speaks of a scandalous woman luring a man, saying:

Come, let us take our fill of *Dod* till morning; let us delight ourselves with love. (Prov 7:18)

7. Our love should include all of the above

The interesting thing is that the Song of Songs, also called the Song of Solomon, uses these three words for love in describing the relationship between lover and beloved.

The words *raya* for friendship, *ahava* for committed love and *dod* for sexual love are all used almost interchangeably in the Song of Songs. This is not because the writer was confused, or just wanted more words to use.

No, I would say that the writer of the Song of Songs was aware that a relationship between lover and beloved needs to be multi-dimensional. The relationship between lover and beloved needs all three: friendship, commitment and passion.

Raya without *ahava* and *dod* is a nice friendship – but it is not enough to build a life together.

Ahava without *raya* and *dod* is commitment without life. Think of the couple together many years who have developed a kind of parallel play and live together but don't really interact with each other.

Dod without *raya* and *ahava* is a passionate, short-term love affair, a relationship with lots of excitement but emotionally empty. That kind of relationship leaves us at best unfulfilled, and at worst shamed and dirty-feeling.

The writer of the Song of Songs writes of a delightful love that is a soul feast, full of deep emotional connection, it says: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

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But the writer is also careful, with the woman in the poem urging other women: "Do not awaken love until it is ready."

I think that refers not just to physical maturity, but also to the emotional capacity to give not only passionate *dod*, but also committed *ahava* and soul-connecting *raya*.

Now, think back with me a moment to the other scripture reading for today, the first New Testament letter of Paul to Timothy. In it, Paul is very concerned about the conduct of widows. People died earlier back then, and there could be widows of all different ages.

Paul is trying to be practical, giving Timothy suggested guidelines for how the community should look after widows. The younger ones, he says, can marry and be supported by their husbands. There were no social security survivor's benefits back then, and women had few good-paying options for work outside the home.

Paul gives warnings about widows who live for pleasure. And it could be that a widow, missing the passion she had with her husband, might take up with other men.

Paul seems kind of legalistic here, and unfortunately, doesn't mention the same standard for men. But what he's really talking about is the same thing as the Song of Songs. Do not stir up love until it is ready. Do not stir up passion unless commitment and soul-connection can also be present.

One of the commentaries I read said that the Old Testament sees love as needing loyalty, mutuality and responsibility. That's saying it needs *ahava* and *raya*.

In 1 Timothy, Paul is saying the same thing. God's unconditional, steadfast *hesed* is for the whole community. *Rayā* is the friendship between members of the community. *Ahava* is the covenant of the community.

Paul believes that the passionate *dod* that people experience can be a danger to the community, so he's setting some practical guidelines, to try to contain that danger.

Our community ought also to encourage love. We want to encourage *dod* to be expressed within the context of soul-understanding and commitment, and with an understanding of the gracious love of God over all.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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“I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens. As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love. Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am faint with love. O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me! I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the wild does: do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready! The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.” Song of Solomon 2:1-12, NRSV.

“Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters--with absolute purity. Honor widows who are really widows. If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents; for this is pleasing in God’s sight. The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. Give these commands as well, so that they may be above reproach. And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints’ feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. But refuse to put younger widows on the list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us.” 1 Timothy 5:1-14, NRSV.