

“People Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love”

Song of Solomons 2:8-13, James 1:17-23

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A husband asked his wife, “Tell me, Dear, have you ever been in love before?” She thought a moment and replied, “No, Darling. I once respected a man for his great intelligence. I admired another for his remarkable courage. I was captivated by yet another for his good looks and charm. But with you, well, how else could you explain it, **except love?**”

You may have your own secret for a successful marriage. In my previous church, an old parishioner who celebrated his sixtieth wedding anniversary shared his own secret of his successful married life with me. With respect and honor, I listened carefully to his advice. He said, “It is very simple. **‘Tenacity.’** Every time you have a problem with your wife, be bold to tell your wife, ‘Sorry, Honey. It is my fault!’”

The 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard shares his wisdom about marriage. He said that “Marriage brings one into fatal connection with custom and tradition, and traditions and customs are like the wind and weather altogether incalculable. Kierkegaard uses marriage as an example of an ethical life choice. He proposed that the individual passed through three stages on the way to becoming a true self: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. In marriage, the excitement of passion can quickly fade, leading to boredom and a diminishing of aesthetic pleasure. However, by consistently **acting for the good of one’s spouse**, one learns that there are enjoyments beyond excitement. In his book *Work of Love*, Kierkegaard claims that **since God is love, love will be known as the fruit of these works of love. So it can only be known through the existential commitment of Christian faith.** This faith is lived only in the attempt to **imitate the life of Christ.** We need to do the work of love. Our faith in God requires us to do love.

Our first Scripture reading shows us a romantic and even sometimes erotic image of love between a man and a woman in describing God’s love for us. It sounds like a love song for a couple. Like our second scripture reading, the book of James in the New Testament, this book, Song of Solomons, was a matter of debate in early church history whether this book could be included as a part of the Scripture or not. The conclusion was to include both, Song of Solomons and James, in the canon Scripture. In the early Centuries, some rabbis treated this book as a drinking song because it seemed that there was no divine

love, but it only focused on human love. Ironically, the focus on faithful human love was indeed a reason why this book is important to be a part of the Scripture.

In Jewish tradition, this song symbolizes the love between the Jewish people and God. In our Christian tradition, it has been understood as a metaphor of the relationship of Christ and the Church until late in the 19th century. Now modern scholars unanimously agree that this book deals with faithful human love which describes the mutual love of God and Israel or Christ and the Church using a dialogue between a pair of lovers. Mutuality and fidelity is the core of this book. This simply reminds us that the Bible doesn't only require us to envision the rigorous and moral claim from the patriarchal image of God, but also shows us a soft, female image of God. In verse 9 and 10, it says "My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag....My beloved speaks and says to me, 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'" What is the core of our human love, even in our married life? It is not about intellectual understanding of love, but it is about actions out of the heart in our faithful relationship. We exercise our mutual love, "giving and receiving" in our relationship with God.

The book of James was another great debate in early Church history, especially in the medieval times. Martin Luther strongly insisted that the church should remove this book from the Scripture, because the book of James doesn't stress the divine work of God or His grace in our salvation. But it emphasizes our work and effort to be accepted by God. Luther argued, "Can we save ourselves by our works and our righteousness?" He calls this book, "an epistle of straw" because he believed that we were saved not by our acts alone, but by the grace of God. But James leaves these out. James emphasizes this: "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." Martin Luther believes that faith in God and our human efforts are separate, but James challenges us saying, "Show me your faith apart from your works and I will show you my faith by my works." The debate over Faith and works are still remains unsettled among Christian churches. What do you think?

I am confident to say that faith in actions is the essential part of our salvation. Our second Scripture reading clearly reminds us that "Do not merely listen to the word, but be doers of the word." Faith is not only spiritual relationship with God in your piety, but we should prove our faith by acts." In verse 25-27, The Bible clearly tells us that those who care for orphans and widows in their distress and for doers who act will be blessed in their doing. From this point of view, I want to thank our grief support group for their good works. God will bless you for your good hearts and works.

In these days, the word, "evangelism" is not a positive connotation any more, but it creates a negative image and uncomfortable feelings to people, because many evangelism driven churches neglected doing good works, but they have concentrated only on spiritual side of Gospel and focusing on increasing their

memberships. In early Christian history in the United States, the Catholic and our Methodist churches made great contributions to establish many schools and hospitals and other social organizations. In our Christian faith, doing good works was not merely a gift from salvation, but it always has been a part of our salvation. As I shared with you in my sermon a couple weeks ago, early Methodists' motto was to "spread the Bible and Holiness". Holiness includes individual and social sanctification. "Do good, do no harm and stay in love with God" has been an important part of the social principle in our Methodism belief.

People will know we are Christians by our love. They will tell we are God's people by our good work. I hope that our Fair Oaks church send more people to UMVIM trip next year, doing more hospitable ministries to reach out to our neighbors and those who are seeking God's presence. God's grace is not intellectual awakening in faith, but it guides us to grow and encourages us to serve in joy. I hope that we are all rooted in God's amazing grace. Our faith sprouts and continues to grow together and in the end, we bear many fruits through our serving ministries in this Christian faith community.