**Passionate Love (7-9-17)**

Gen. 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67 Romans 7: 15-25(a)

Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

**Responsive Reading**: Song of Solomon 2: 8-13, 16

**Summary:** Romance novels often say that many people can go through their entire lives without ever experiencing passionate love. This will only be true if they never come to know God.

 The Old Testament story of the finding of Rebecca for Isaac is only one of many, many love stories in the Bible. God makes the right woman obvious to Isaac’s servant by her extravagant hospitality to a stranger, her willingness to work hard, and her compassion, even for the thirsty camels. It is no easy or one trip job to water a camel! Rebecca’s actions identify her as God’s choice for Isaac, and I would be remiss if I didn’t point out that this sort of hospitality, hard work, and inclusive compassion is what we strive for in Gaines Congregational Church, UCC.

 Moving on to the Song of Songs, you can see how passionate lovers became a lasting metaphor, an extended parable representing the relationship of our lover, Jesus, to His Bride, the Church. “My lover is mine, and I am his;” that says it all.

 No love story is complete without some conflict which threatens the union. Paul, frustrated, complains that what he hates and knows is wrong in his relationship with God, he ends up doing. Worse, what he loves and knows is good, he fails to do. This seems to Paul to be as inescapable as a law of nature, like gravity. Drop an apple and it falls to the ground. Put me in the presence of my beloved and I will do, say, or be something that hurts the very one I love. “Who can rescue me?” Paul asks. The answer is the One I love and hurt: God, seen in Jesus, who never turns away and even dies for us.

 That brings me to Matthew, who tells of Jesus making an ironic comparison between a manipulative attention game popular among children and the displeasure of many with himself and his cousin, John the Baptist. The marketplace children sing and the stodgy adults refuse to pause their business and dance! The children, demanding attention, wail like mourners at a wake and the inconsiderate crowds do not stop what they are doing to cry.

This whole scene is rather like a toddler who hands you a toy phone, several dozen times as you try to make supper, expecting you to answer it. The adult parallel is found in the critics who panned John for being an ascetic. These same critics put down Jesus when He enjoys food and likes wine with a meal. Go figure, you can’t have scotch on the rocks without the ice!

This montage of images shows dynamics which confuse the one romance that really matters, the passionate yearning of our souls toward God. God is one with Jesus, incarnate and made flesh in Him. Our spirits yearn to be one flesh with our lover, needing Jesus to live within us in order to be truly “made in the image of God.”

I’m hardly unique among women for yearning for a passionate, enduring love. You don’t hear the guys talk much about this, but I’m sure my yearning will resonate with the loneliness of men. There is a very good reason that we call Jesus’ experience on the Cross, “the Passion.” I want a soul partner who cares about me most of all, above even his own life, and whose love will last forever. I need look no further than Jesus. My beloved is mine, I am His, and He is one with God.

Sacred passion is far more than sensual feelings. Holy passion engages heart, spirit, mind and body as everything we are seeks a continual love expressed in every living moment. This becomes visible as we respect and care for each other. Rebecca is known when she reaches out in hospitality and in charity to a stranger. Jesus says that when we bless others, even the least among us, we have blessed our beloved, Himself. The passion Jesus has for us is the same passion I am encouraging us to have for each other.

I often end a prayer or a sermon by encouraging a congregational repetition of “Amen,” a word meaning, “So be it,” or as Captain Picard says, “Let it be so,” or even, “Engage!” Those endings are good, but I’d suggest another form of “Amen” which is echoed by each couple in the wedding ritual. I am suggesting the phrase, “I do.” And so, “Do you pledge your passion to your Beloved and to each other as your Beloved has also done for you on the Cross?”

And the church says: “\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” So do I.