

# Lovers and friends, the ultimate human communion

**By Bishop Paul V. Marshall**

*[This is Bishop Paul Marshall's June column for secular newspapers, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by The Morning Call, Allentown, on the first Saturday of every month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. Some 120 columns have been published over the past eleven years.]*

This traditional month for brides calls to mind the Bible's great love song, one of its least known books.

The *Song of Songs*, sometimes called the *Song of Solomon*, is unique among the sacred books of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is the only book where a woman speaks in her own voice, rather than having her words reported by a narrator. It is the only book to report anything of the inner life of a woman in love.

In this book, a woman is the protagonist; she is her beloved's equal; she even shares her remarkable dream life with us. How tradition came to speak of the *Song of Songs* as written by Solomon is a mystery.

The book does not mount a sustained argument. It depicts confusion at times – it's a picture of passion. The lovers revel in nature; they have a sense of play; they tease and they delight in waiting.

I would not hide this book from teenagers. Its main tension comes from longing: waiting for the right person, time, and place. Books and movies in our day deal with passion by having folks go to bed (if a bed is even used) at the earliest possible moment. Here there is none of that, nothing casual, but elaborate courting, giving the erotic all the attention it is due.

The main reason I would have young people and everyone contemplating marriage read this book is that neither the man nor the woman is the dominant party in the relationship: they do not control, dominate, or subjugate each other. They meet as equals as they court,

tease, and entice each other.

No one person has to do all the work in making the love happen. No one person has to make all the effort to make the relationship playful. They delight in each other without seeking to control.

The modern reader will never relax with the ancient compliments about a lover who is likened to a goat, or remarkable for having all her teeth! However, the modern reader is helpfully struck that, amidst all the passionate talk, the description the male lover most often uses for the woman is “my friend.” And certainly the playful talk of climbing the palm tree will make us giggle as surely as it did the unknown woman of the ancient Near East.

Love poetry is powerful – we are aware of rabbis who were upset about the popularity of the book and Christian monks who spiritualized its content away. Jews and Christians have been nervous about this book – no other Hebrew book has had more books written about it.

The celebration of the physical has been hard for some people to take – but think back to Genesis and the “very, very good” God stamps on the world, especially the animate world. The *Song of Songs* repeatedly and deliberately takes the reader back to the original Garden.

We have friends and we have lovers. The ideal expression of love is with someone who is both. The *Song of Songs* celebrates the ultimate human communion for careful and patient lovers.

Many have guessed about why and how this book got into anyone’s Bible. It is a book to be cherished by religious people as the owner’s manual for the human body and its emotional component.

How to be a lover without being oppressor or victim, how to take the risks, and how to play remain questions that go to the heart of our existence. The *Song of Songs* reminds us of the glorious possibilities.

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