

As You Wish!

Song of Songs 8:6-7

I am a romantic at heart. I solicited your input for movies for this series because I would have been quite content to do the entire sermon series on romantic comedies – I mean Meg Ryan and Tom Hank could have together occupied at least three weeks. Alas, this is our week for a nice, strong love story between Buttercup and Westley in *The Princess Bride*. Their love began with Westley being a devoted farmhand, whom Buttercup enjoyed bossing around and referring to exclusively as “farm boy,” not much of a term of endearment.

However, Westley and Buttercup’s love grew, until he decided to go off to earn enough money to be able to provide for her... (Okay, so there are a few flaws and his patriarchy is showing). As she bids him farewell, looking deep into his eyes, Westley promises to always come for her. “*How can you be sure?*” Buttercup asks. “*This is true love. Do you think this happens every day?*” Westley replies.

Now, like a grandfather reading to his sick grandson played by a nearly baby Fred Savage, I can interrupt this story to insert a little commentary. A movie about true love is fascinating, and I think watching such movies are an important spiritual exercise. As your Pastor, I am called to invite you all into new and meaningful spiritual practices. I’ll tell you why watching exceedingly romantic movies is important – we are all engaged in loving relationships every day – with spouses, with parents, aunts, nieces, nephews, children, best friends...and the feeling of loving another and being loved by them is about the best in the world.

However, our human relationships tend to be somewhat flawed. In the words of the unfortunate portrayal of a clergy person, “Mawage is that bwessed awangment, that dweam wifin a dweam,” and for those of us who are married or partnered, we may find that marriage and true wuv – often seems like a dream we have yet to experience. My parents have been married for 40 years, and I’m so proud of them for finally taking a trip together because since I was about 12 or 13, I have planned their anniversaries for so dad wouldn’t forget and mom wouldn’t get mad.

Seeing on the big screen love that is extravagant helps to expand our capacity for envisioning a more perfect kind of love than what we’ve experienced thus far. Much like in the book the Song of Solomon or Song of Songs, where we hear of a tenacious, all-encompassing kind of love, that makes some embarrassed to read it out loud. Seeing love stories that seem “inconceivable,” to use Vizzini’s word, help us to be able to conceive of a love so big, so grandiose that it would stop at nothing to rescue us...and that starts to sound like God’s love.

Buttercup believes that Westley dies, and she mourns. Eventually she is engaged to marry Prince Humperdink, but she is kidnapped. Westley, behind a mask in Zorro-like fashion, pursues her across the wild sea, climbs the cliffs of Insanity, defeats a Spanish fencing champion Inigo Montoya, wrestles a giant Fessik, and outwits the Sicilian assassin Vezzini.

These three tests could be compared with Jesus’ three temptations in the wilderness by Satan, all of which sought to challenge who Jesus really was, and if he could be tempted away from his mission. Each of those three temptations clarified for Jesus exactly who and what God was calling him to, and following his temptation, he began his public ministry – loving with an extravagant, inconceivable kind of love.

Once Westley finally reaches Buttercup, she argues with him, and it's clear Buttercup is still grieving her true love and Westley feels betrayed by her engagement. It's not until Buttercup pushes him down the hill and he calls out those three words that revealed his love and devotion earlier "As You Wish" that Buttercup realizes it's him.

This exchange: the confession, the honesty, the reckoning that sometimes our own disappointments, assumptions, and hurts get in the way of relationship are important not only in our human relationships, but our relationship with God as well. Thus we pray a prayer of confession as we begin worship so that we can name the ways we understand we have betrayed God's intentions and been short-sighted and self-centered. And following a time of confession, sometimes whether we've pushed God or not, we hear words of unfailing love, words of Assurance: As you wish.

*As we wish, God welcomes us back into right relationship.
As we wish, God's waiting with open arms to welcome us home.
As we wish, God doesn't give up not matter how far we've gone.*

But the movie's not over yet, our couple runs from Prince Humperdink, they have to master the fire swamp with its three challenges: the flame spurts, lightning sand, and rodents of unusual size. Westley and Buttercup learn to listen for the sounds leading to flame spurts and Westley picks up Buttercup and carries her over that which might harm her, putting out the fire as they learn. When Buttercup steps right into lightning sand without looking, Westley dives in to pull her out, and even wrestles and kills the rodents of unusual size. Now where's the theological metaphor here? Perhaps you're already ahead of me.

Life is a fire swamp. Even when we are walking hand in and hand with God, trusting God to guide us, praying for support. Out of the blue come flame spurts... that threaten to engulf us.

Lumps that turn cancerous... Depression... Job loss... Financial uncertainty... Betrayal by those we thought loved us.

We try our best, and we have faith, but life happens and we get burned. Yet, we serve a God who is with us, trying to pat down the flames and carry us through.

We encounter lightning quicksand that seemed to be solid ground. We place our confidence in what we thought we knew, and all of a sudden, we realize we have much more to learn. We thought we lived in a world where all people are treated equally until we open our eyes to privilege and prejudice and find that systems are rigged to benefit some and not others. Our siblings are drowning in quicksand unable to get medical treatment, unable to get help with mental illness, living on the street, being targeted for violence because of the color of their skin.

There are children detained at the border, whose families sought a way out of their own fire swamp to find themselves in the midst of quicksand, children separated from their families and reports of sexual abuse of detainees...yes, friends, we find ourselves struggling to breathe as we are deep in the muck. And even so, our God dives in to help clear our eyes, to give us the strength to resist and fight those systems of oppression that would keep us and others in bondage.

In the last 24 hours, there have been two reports of mass shootings, in El Paso, Texas and in Dayton, Ohio, and only last week a shooting at the food festival in Gilroy, California. 20 dead here, 3 dead there, 9 more last night, with many more wounded...it seems that we have rodents

of unusual size all around, and there isn't a community that is safe as long as there is access to weapons that can wipe out life so quickly. Politicians of unusual size seem more content to argue and debate than to save the lives of innocent people who decide to live their lives. And, the poisonous, racist rhetoric that comes out of the mouths and tweets of some who are supposed to be leaders seems to invite and incite even more violence. Lord, in your mercy. I am not sure the best strategy to wrestle and defeat these rodents, but I hope that you will show us the way.

Westley and Buttercup make it through the fire swamp, but are captured, and Westley is ultimately tortured and killed. Yet, through the strength of true love with a little help from the miracle man and his nagging wife – Westley comes back to life, and prevails, defeating Prince Humperdink and riding off with his beloved.

Jesus' love too, was not defeated by death. And in a somewhat inconceivable turn of events, Jesus left the tomb to walk alongside, to break bread, and remind his followers how to stay the course. Whether we are in the middle of the fire swamp, uncertain if anyone loves us, or simply trying to find our way forward to what God has next...I pray that we remember that our God loves each and every single one of us with an extravagant, reckless, tenacious kind of love that we may have difficulty understanding, and yet it is real.

May we begin to conceive of that love and share it with the world. As you wish. Amen.