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Bridge Street United Church
September 1, 2024

Readings: Song of Songs 2:8-17; Psalm 42; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 20-23

Love—Human and Divine

As I noted in this week’s newsletter, the Biblical book, Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon to use an older title, is a collection of love poetry, different poems and bits collected into one Biblical book. I am not going to ask you to raise your hands, but I wonder how many of you have ever heard any sermon on a text from Song of Songs. I need to acknowledge that, until today, I have never preached on this or any text from Song of Songs in a Sunday worship service. I say “in a Sunday worship service.” About 20 years ago now, during my time teaching at Queen’s, I presided at the marriage of two Theology students. After I had agreed to preside at their wedding, they said, “By the way, we want you to preach a sermon at our wedding”—something uncommon but not unknown in the United Church. They then followed that up with “And we want you to use Song of Songs 2:8-17 as the passage on which to preach.”

You won’t hear a rerun of that sermon today. Sermons should be new and fresh for the occasion, and that was a sermon preached at a marriage service. But today’s reading is a passage, and Song of Songs is a book, that merits our attention. The book, Song of Songs, has some fascinating features and an equally fascinating history. For starters, in content—love poetry—it is unlike any other Biblical book. Second, it is one of only two books in the Bible where you do not find God named in any explicit way, the other book being the book of Esther. Third, for most of the dialogue in Song of Songs, it is a woman speaking, sometimes for herself and sometimes voicing what she imagines her male lover is thinking. Indeed, an increasing number of

contemporary Biblical scholars believe that a woman may well have been the author of this book. Those are the fascinating features.

Then there is the fascinating history. In Christian circles, from the third through the fifteenth century, there were more commentaries written by scholars about Song of Songs than about any other Biblical book in either the Old or the New Testament. In fact, not just “more,” but “far more.” Despite the fact that hardly anyone wrote a commentary on Song of Songs during the latter part of the nineteenth century or during the twentieth century, Song of Songs still ranks third, of the sixty-six books in the Christian Bible, for the number of commentaries written about it. One third century Christian theologian, a man named Origen, wrote a ten volume commentary on this rather slender Biblical book [Schiffedercker]. A twelfth century monastic reformer named Bernard of Clairvaux preached 86 different sermons of which we are aware, all on only the first two chapters of Song of Songs [Schiffedercker].

The other fascinating thing about this book is how it has usually been interpreted. Both Jewish and Christian scholars and preachers have usually interpreted the book allegorically. An allegory is when you take a story and interpret the character or events of the story not literally but figuratively, where the character or event represents something very different from what you have in the literal text. It was common for Jewish scholars to interpret the love poetry allegorically, seeing the woman and her lover as representing God’s love for the people of Israel. Christian scholars and preachers, until recently, also generally interpreted the passage allegorically, seeing the events and dialogue as representing either God’s love for the church or God’s love for an individual.

So what might this text say to us, now? Although these comments could also apply to the book more generally, I think there are some things we can, with profit, take away from a

reflection on this text from Song of Songs, chapter 2. The first—in a world in which human sexuality is often used to sell products or featured in pornographic displays, this passage celebrates the love of one human being for another, and the sexual expression of that love, as a gift, a blessed gift, from God. That is a message we get from a straightforward reading of this passage. In the reading, the woman recalls a visit by her beloved. She describes his eager, exuberant approach “leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills,” standing “behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.” She remembers his call to her: “Arise my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.” She recalls him continuing, “O my dove, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.” It is not hard to imagine a couple, whether same sex or heterosexual, and of whatever age, wandering in the countryside in the spring, taking in the sights and sounds, enjoying one another’s company, hearing audibly, as this text recounts, the voice of the turtledove.

And then just before the conclusion of this passage and this poem, “My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies, Until the day breathes and the shadows flee.” While I cannot be sure, I think that language about pasturing his flock among the lilies is likely a euphemism for physical love-making, and she reminisces about such a time with her beloved. There are, I think, in this poem, and unquestionably in Song of Songs more generally, expressions of sexual intimacy.

This passage celebrates human love, in all its dimensions, as a blessed gift. Now, even as I make that statement, I am aware of how painful this whole subject can be for many including, perhaps, some of you here this morning. For some people, their experience of such relationships is about as close to hell on earth as any of us will ever know in this life. But this beautiful poetry,

and it is beautiful poetry, captures a spirit some of us have been lucky enough to know, and others to imagine, in their hopes and dreams. I think we need to celebrate both that reality and the possibility of that reality.

Further, we need to see human sexuality, with its expression in sexual intimacy within committed relationships, as indeed a gift from God. Seeing human sexuality and sexual intimacy as a divine gift is something our Jewish brothers and sisters have done better than we Christians. Our problem, I think, dates back to the influence of Greek thought, so influential in the era when Christianity had its birth. Greek philosophy in the early Christian era believed that the body and the soul were separate entities, and that the soul was good and the body bad. This passage's underlying sense that our human sexuality is a gift from God is deeply rooted in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament. One could hardly do better, apart from a text such as this one from Song of Songs, than to recall the creation story found in Genesis, chapter one, where God creates human beings in God's own likeness or image. In this understanding of creation, our sexuality is indeed a divine gift. Song of Songs generally, including today's reading, may also be helpful in terms of what we think about relationships. There is no male dominance here, no female submissiveness or subordination. It is a text about two equals in a relationship, each one eager to initiate in relationship, each one eager to affirm the other's love. It is a text about mutuality and fidelity and equality in a relationship, as much as it is a text about passion and longing.

There is a second thing about this text that we can hear. In this regard I am going to do something morning I shall never do again while I am your minister. I am going to move into the realm of allegorical interpretation, an approach to Scripture I almost always want to avoid. It is an approach to Biblical interpretation I dislike, for in an allegorical interpretation of a passage of

Scripture one can make the symbols or events of a story represent virtually anything. When it comes to this text, I want to treat this passage for what it is—love poetry—love poetry that, implicitly, celebrates human sexuality and human sexual expression within a committed relationship, as a gift from God. But I am also convinced that rabbis from the beginning of the Common Era through the medieval period, who also saw in this passage an expression of God’s love for Israel, and early and medieval Christian writers, who saw in this passage an expression of God’s love for the individual and for the church, were onto something. In making those interpretations, they treated this passage allegorically.

It is easy, and obviously problematic, to read into a passage such as this one, something that is not there. But in this case, those medieval theologians, in their allegorical interpretations of Song of Songs, chapter 2, were applying to this passage a concept that was found elsewhere in Scripture. In other parts of Scripture we find the love of God for Israel expressed in terms of the relationship of two lovers in a committed relationship. One finds this imagery in its most graphic form in the words addressed to the people of Israel as they returned from exile and endeavoured to re-establish themselves in their former homeland. They had uprooted themselves from the life they had established for themselves in Babylon, and they returned to their homeland, to a land still devastated by the Babylonian invasion of about a half century earlier. In the midst of the struggle and the heartache of that time, a time when those struggles brought genuine questions about whether God really did care and whether God could make a difference, the prophet brought this word from God. I quote here from Isaiah 62: “You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married. For the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the

bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” [Isaiah 62: 4-5]. If those words from Isaiah are a metaphor for God’s desire to be in loving and right relationship with us, and I would certainly read them that way, I think it is equally appropriate to see Song of Songs 2: 8-17 not only as an expression of that fresh blissful love of two young, or perhaps not so young, individuals, but also as an expression of God, as lover, seeking out God’s beloved, namely us.

In this passage from Song of Songs, with the woman’s expression of her deep desire for relationship with her beloved, is it not possible to see an expression of Israel’s desire to be in covenant relationship with God? Is it not possible to see in this passage from Song of Songs an expression of the desire for covenant relationship with God from the human side? By the “human side” I mean not just the people of Israel in their relationship with God, but us—you, me. We know of God’s deep love for us expressed so powerfully in those words of John 3:16 that God so loved the world that God came among us in human form. So much of both Testaments reveal God’s deep desire for a covenant relationship with us. But are there not also those moments when, from our side, there is also the deep desire for relationship with God. Sometimes the motivation is clear, sometimes not. But the desire is there.

In that regard, the hymn that will follow this sermon captures in its poetry the hymn writer’s sense of this strong desire from our side, from the human side. At least for me, the words of this hymn have strong echoes of this allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs, chapter 2, the human longing for that strong relationship with God, a relationship that transforms us, even as the intimate relationship we have with another human being transforms us.

Here now the first and last stanzas of that hymn:

Come down, O love divine, seek now this soul of mine,
and visit it with your own ardour glowing.
O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear,
and kindle it your holy flame bestowing.

And now the last stanza:

And so the yearning strong with which the soul will long
shall far outpass the power of human telling,
for none can guess its grace, till love creates the place
wherein the Holy Spirit makes its dwelling.

Today's reading is one that speaks, blessedly, of human love and reflects the richness an intimate relationship between two human beings can bring. Without in any way denying that, I think we can also hear in these words from Song of Song chapter 2 an expression of God's desire for relationship with us and our deep desire for relationship with God, a relationship that, from both sides, mirrors the relationship of lovers. And to that God, who so loved the world, to the one in whom we have experienced that divine love in human form, and to the Holy Spirit, the loving presence of God with us now, and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

Jenson, Robert W. *Song of Songs*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2012.

Murphy, Roland E. *The Song of Songs*. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1990.

Schifferdecker, Kathryn. "Commentary on Song of Songs 2:8-13" (2009) in <https://www.workingpreacher.org/> [Accessed August 26, 2024].