

August 29, 2021: Song of Songs 2:8-13 (Proper 17)

Can you guess which book of the Bible had the most commentaries written on it by the end of the Middle Ages? Surprise: it was the Song of Songs. St. Bernard of Clairvaux is the all-time champ but others also plunged in. Why? It has to do with assumptions about human love and sexuality. The ancients saw romantic love and sex as wonderful, accessible metaphors for God's relationship with us. We tend to see love and sex as means to ends, whether those ends be personal fulfillment or selling things.

The Song of Songs is a Hebrew love poem. There are two 'speakers', a man and woman, in poetic dialogue, each enraptured with the other. Some of the language and images strike us as odd but weren't to people then. One puzzling fact: there is no mention of God anywhere in the Song of Songs.

The standard interpretation of the Song is that human love is a vivid metaphor for God's relationship to Israel, and therefore to the Church, and the individual soul. Yet, metaphors only work if the metaphor itself has meaning. If I say some politician has the spirit of Abraham Lincoln, you would 'get it.' The same metaphor would be incomprehensible to someone in Cambodia.

Our first task, then, is to accept the Song of Songs for what it is: an exuberant, erotic love poem. In that sense, we see the Bible is big enough to include such utterly human experience and idealism. Is it not delightful to encounter a part of the Bible that marvels at the wonder of the human body and the joy of human love?

Love brings joy and joy opens us to more joy: love changes one's perceptions and is intended to. The danger of 'romantic' love is not that it goes too far but that it does not go far enough, becoming stalled, self-absorbed with the couple, or worse with only the individual.

The difference between mature ecstatic love and lust involves purpose. An immature lover uses others for her/his own ends: perhaps to prove one's womanhood/manhood, exercise power over others, or even relieve boredom. Lust takes from others to fill up what is lacking in oneself; therefore, love and lust are irreconcilable opposites. True ecstatic love reaches beyond self. One sign of such love is this: receiving from and giving to the Beloved are equally joyful, not two different actions but one movement of love. The lover is as much fulfilled in giving as by receiving.

The Song of Songs witnesses that ecstatic love has a sensuous, lush fertility reaching beyond itself. For those who deeply love someone who returns love, it is as if a desert has burst into bloom. The boundary between self and world is bridged. Those in love cannot believe the whole universe does not rejoice with them. Such expectation is not merely the product of a silly romantic stupor. If God, who is love, is the really, real reality of all existence, then we should expect love to be recognized, shared, and celebrated.

This should lead no one to a Pollyanna view of romantic love. We live in a culture drowning in images that degrade human sexuality to incite lust for economic gain. If we just drink the right beer or liquor, drive the right vehicle, use the correct deodorant, toothpaste, or perfume, use the latest cosmetics and hair goo—we will be irresistible, and fulfilled. The cure for such salacious shabbiness is true ecstatic love. A contemporary theologian, borrowing from ancient Christian wisdom, writes: "Sin is a temporary state of insanity in which one is blind to God and totally absorbed in oneself" (John-Julian). The cure for such insanity is easily stated: love God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Thomas Aquinas taught that a human being is metaphysically incapable of choosing evil, but we can misperceive evil for good, out of selfishness. We can also choose a lesser good rather than the best good. When we choose what accords with God's will for ourselves, we choose what is best. When we choose what is God's will for others and the world, we choose what is best and our love is perfected, God's love is perfected in us (I John 2:5). How do we know what is God's good-est good for ourselves, others, and the world? We read our Bibles; we study the Mothers and Fathers of the Faith; we pray for wisdom; we live together with mutual respect and humility; we are merciful and forgiving; we repent our sins and seek amendment; we do the next right thing; we remain teachable.

God loves you passionately, ecstatically, more intensely than a lover enraptured with the beloved. God yearns that we learn to love and practice love with holy passion. Amen.